

The Six Preparatory Practices – Practices 1 & 2 (lightly edited transcript)

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How to rely on a spiritual mentor as the root for developing the path

What I want to go into now in this talk is the fourth point in the outline[#]: “How to guide students to enlightenment”. We will start on the first sub-point: “How to rely on a spiritual mentor as the root of developing the path,” but, actually, this section is not on the specific topic of “How to rely on a teacher”. First comes the whole discussion on how to set up a meditation session. This whole topic of how to set up a meditation session has been put in here in preparation for the first actual meditation that we are doing, which is “How to rely on a spiritual teacher”. These instructions also apply equally to all the forth coming topics that are going to be explained, like ‘precious human life’, ‘impermanence and death’, and so on. They are the basic general instructions for setting up a meditation on any of these topics.

Setting up a meditation practice

In general, it is very good to meditate on the Lamrim teachings in a retreat setting, where you cut out a lot of your extraneous activities and focus on the teachings. You would do maybe four meditation sessions a day or six sessions. For those of us who have very busy lives, who can't take out time to do retreats, then we can still continue to do the Lamrim meditations, doing one session a day or, if possible, two sessions a day. The important thing is to be continuous in the practice, to not break the continuity. It is like anything you train yourself to do, you really need to practice everyday. If you practice the piano for one day and then don't do it for another month, you lose everything you have gained. It is really important that everyday you do some meditation.

Keep your sessions short at the beginning, maybe half an hour. If that's too long for you, just do twenty minutes. Don't make your session too long. Don't squeeze your mind nor push it, but rather it is really important that when you meditate, you come off your cushion wanting more; not come off your cushion saying, “Oh, this is so long and I'm so tired. I'm glad it's over! I don't want to do that again.” But instead, you want to come off with the feeling, “Oh, I could have done more because this was really nice.” You should be eager to want to come back. So keep your session to a reasonable length, don't push them and make them too long.

Then go through the path sequentially. Spend some time, as I'm teaching the different meditations, to concentrate on those particular meditation subjects. After we have gone through the whole text, then you can do each subject for a week, or one subject for three days, and then go on to the next subject. You can time it yourself but do it in a sequential manner and then go back and start again at the beginning because in that way you'll get through all the different subjects. But this is for after we have covered all the subjects. Right now, while we are teaching the text, try and really spend time on the particular subjects that are being taught so they're fresh in your mind and you can gain some experience with them.

It is good to meditate in the same place everyday, if you can. Set aside one corner of your house and establish a shrine. Keep the area where you meditate clean so that every time you walk by that place, you get the feeling of how you feel when you do your meditation and prayers. Every time you sit down there, you're building up that same energy. So do it in a quiet, special kind of place in your house. Don't meditate in front of the TV. Don't do it in the kids' playroom. Meditate in a quiet, pleasant place that is really going to build up the energy inside of you.

If you can avoid it, don't meditate on your bed. Why? Because when we see our bed, what do we think of? [Laughter] Right! We are not really thinking of the lucid, clear mind of meditation when we see our bed. That's why they say try and sit somewhere else; not on your bed. Also, don't sit on the pillow you sleep with, which you lay your head on. Have your own meditation cushion. I am describing the ideal conditions. If you have your own home, this isn't too difficult to do, and it really pays off.

What is to be done during the meditation session

Six preparatory practices

Before we actually start the meditation on a specific subject matter – for example, relying on the teacher or the precious human life or death and impermanence – first, there are six preparatory practices that are done. These are very important. Often we like to skip the preparatory things and go right into the main, juicy part. But in actual fact, the preparations are very important. If you ever go to teachings in Dharamsala, His Holiness will spend about half an hour doing prayers before the session. We do it for just a very short time. We do the Western condensed version, but His Holiness always says that if you prepare the mind properly through contemplating the meaning of these prayers, then when you actually meditate you get somewhere in your meditation. But if your mind isn't prepared properly, then even if you spend a long time on the meditation, your mind is still very much like a piece of rock and you don't really get anywhere.

Now, I imagine different questions will come up as we're going along doing these six preparations, because it does involve talking about devotional practices. Some people like devotional practices and feel that they are really beneficial. Other people get very turned off by them. That's because we have very different dispositions and different personalities. If you are a person who likes them, you can do the longer version of the different prayers and practices. If you are a person who doesn't like so many prayers and practices, you can do a short version. The reason we do the prayers that are written down by others is because we don't always know what kind of attitudes to cultivate in our prayers. We don't always know how to train our mind. The lineage teachers, out of their kindness, wrote down different prayers and prescribed different practices as a way of giving us very specific instructions on what thoughts to develop and what specific things to do. My personal feeling is that if you understand all these steps and the attitudes you want to develop, and if you feel more comfortable saying the prayers in your own words, this is fantastic. The guidelines from the lineage lamas are there to help us because we don't always know what to think about.

We have six preparatory practices. I'll just list them and then we'll go through them in depth. Before the meditation session we have to:

- 1) Clean the room and set up the shrine or the altar.
- 2) Obtain offerings and arrange them very nicely.
- 3) Sit in the eight-point posture, which refers to establishing a good motivation and sitting in the correct physical composure, and then you take refuge and generate an altruistic intention for your meditation.
- 4) Visualize the field of positive potential, which are all the holy beings—the lineage teachers, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and so on.
- 5) Do the seven-limb prayer like we did before the teachings here, and we offer the mandala which is symbolic of the universe.
- 6) Request inspiration.

If you look closely, the prayers that we do before the teachings are all contained in these practices. Here we are going to get into some explanation of the prayers that we've been doing.

1. Clean the room, set up the shrine

Before we actually sit down, the first thing we want to do is clean the room. This is very helpful for our

mind because our environment is a reflection of our internal state of mind. Having a clean, neat and tidy environment is usually suggestive that your mind is clean and neat. That's not to say that if your house is messy, your mind is messy. But sometimes it happens that way. It's something to check up. However, we can say that when we go into a clean environment, our mind feels much more relaxed than if we go into an environment that is completely cluttered. Many objects overload you sensually if the whole place is filthy. Clutter and mess does something to put our minds off.

So we clean the room. They talk about five advantages of cleaning the room:

- a) You get your mother off your back. No, Lama Tsong Khapa didn't say that. [Laughter]. Rather, your room becomes clean and pure. You've set up a good environment for yourself.
- b) You help other people's minds because when other people come into your place, they feel relaxed. They feel that it's clean. We know what this is like. We get certain feelings when we walk in certain areas.
- c) They talk very often of different kinds of gods, or different kinds of spirits—other beings who are still within the cyclic existence who have certain powers to be able to help practitioners. The gods that are attracted to virtue and attracted to Buddhism are also attracted to a nice, neat environment. They tend to come and also influence the energy of the place and help to protect us. This, by the way, is why they say not to smoke around temples and Dharma centers—not only is the smoke offensive to human beings, but also to these different gods, and it chases them away. I don't think the tobacco companies will believe me, but you know what to do [laughter].
- d) You create the karma to have a beautiful body in future lives, an attractive body that is pleasing to other people.
- e) You also create the karma to be born as one of these gods or devas, or even in the pure realm. In other words, cleaning your environment is like cleaning your mind.

When you clean the environment, it is a meditation in and of itself. They always tell this story about one disciple at the time of the Buddha. He was very, very dumb. He had one teacher, a non-Buddhist teacher who was trying to teach him two syllables, 'Om Bum.' When he remembered 'Om,' he forgot 'Bum,' and when he remembered 'Bum,' he forgot 'Om.' Eventually the teacher got fed up and kicked the student out. This guy was just completely overwhelmed. "I can't learn anything. I am so dumb, my teacher kicked me out!" He was crying and crying and crying.

Somebody brought him to the Buddha. The Buddha, because he had so many skilful means, gave this guy a meditation practice suitable for him. He gave him a broom and had him sweep the courtyard in front of the temple where the monks and nuns were doing their prayers. He had to sweep one side of the courtyard and then he would do the other side. When he swept the other side, the side that was first swept became dirty so he had to go back and sweep that again, so he spent all his time going back and forth cleaning both sides of the courtyard. The Buddha told him as he was cleaning, to say, "Clean the dust, clean the stain." This man went all day long with his broom saying, "Clean the dust, clean the stain," as he was sweeping. At some point, through the force of offering service with faith and devotion to the Buddha and to the Sangha, and through the force of continually thinking about what does "clean the dust, clean the stain" mean, he realized that it means to clean the two levels of obscurations.

Remember at the last talk, I spoke about the two levels of obscurations? The first one being the afflicted obscurations [Note: 'afflicted obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'deluded obscurations'] – the ignorance, attachment, and anger – and the karma that cause rebirth? These are considered the dirt, so you clean that. "Clean the stain" refers to the subtle cognitive obscurations [Note: 'cognitive obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'obscurations to omniscience'] that are like the smell of onions after you had taken the onions out of the pot. In other words, the dualistic appearance of phenomena. He began to understand exactly what the obstacles of the path were and he began to understand the value of the wisdom realizing emptiness....

[Recording is incomplete due to change of sides during tape recording]

...because we don't have the karma to meet Shakyamuni directly, our spiritual master becomes the one that helps us contact Shakyamuni's teaching. This is why we put the picture of the teacher higher, okay? Then you have the Buddha image right below that and then below that, or surrounding that, you would have pictures of different meditative deities such as Manjushri, Tara, Chenrezig and whatever other ones that you happen to have faith in and that benefit your practice.

Your photographs and statues represent the body of the Buddha, the form of the Buddha. You also want to have a representation of the speech of the Buddha by putting a text on your shrine. They recommend putting on the Prajnaparamita sutra if you can, or at least the Heart Sutra (this is the short version), or some kind of Dharma book. Your figures of the Buddha and the teacher would be in the center. On their right, (in other words on your left as you look at the altar), you would put the text. The text represents the Buddha's speech, the means of communicating the Dharma. We would also want to have a symbol of the Buddha's mind. On the other side, in other words, from the side of the Buddha, on the Buddha's left (or on your right as you are looking at it), you would place the figure of a stupa, like the stupa at Bodhgaya that represents the Buddha's mind, or, a bell. In the tantric practice, the bell represents the wisdom realizing emptiness. So there you have the three representations or symbols of the body, speech and mind of all the holy beings.

When you put your Dharma text on the shrine it is nice to have it wrapped up and kept clean. If you use the book a lot, I don't think you necessarily have to wrap it each time, but do keep the whole area clean. Also, generally, your Dharma books are kept higher than the statue of the Buddha. Very often, like when you go to the main temple in Dharamsala, you have the statue of the Buddha in the center and you have the Dharma texts on each side, but the Dharma texts aren't down on the ground. They are raised up. Sometimes you go into rooms and the shelf on the top is the one with the Dharma books and then lower, below that, is the altar and the pictures of the teachers and the Buddha and the deities.

Now, the reason that the Dharma texts are kept higher than the pictures is because the Buddha's speech is the way in which the Buddha benefits us the most. It is through the power of speech, through the power of the teaching that we come to understand it. Of all the qualities of the Buddha, the communicative ability—the Buddha's speech—is the one that directly benefits us the most. Since the Dharma texts represent that, they are kept higher up.

Also, keep your Dharma books on a separate shelf. Don't mix your Dharma books up with all your sexy novels and your gardening books. Don't put your gardening books on top and your Dharma books below. You could say, "These are a lot of rules and regulations. Why is everything so picky-finicky?" I am not saying that you have to do it this way. What I am saying is, check up your own mental attitude and see if it makes a difference to you how you treat the physical representations of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Does your mind feel better if you treat the representation of the Dharma teachings in a very respectful way—keeping them high, keeping them clean, and not mixing them up with Newsweek, Business Review, and Wall Street Journal? Does that make your mind feel different than when you just have your Dharma books thrown here and there and mixed in with the TV guide and everything else? Just check up on your own attitude and see if it makes a difference to you. If it does, then you can see a bit of reason in keeping your Dharma books high and all your other books in a separate place.

Do keep them clean. Sometimes you go to people's homes, the Dharma books are all up there on a nice high shelf, you go to pick one out, and all the dust just falls off all over the place. Try to keep it clean. This is a way of learning to be mindful, a way of training our mind. Again, it is something that might take you time to see the sense of it. It is not just a bunch of needless rules and regulations. It is not done to show respect to the Dharma texts because the Dharma texts, from their side, what do they need to be shown respect for? A book does not need respect.

This is all done to make us more aware of our relationship with physical objects, how we treat physical objects and the meaning of these different physical objects to us in our life. It is a way of making us aware, making us mindful so that we do cherish the internal realizations of the Dharma and how they help us. Seeing what the books really do represent – they communicate the path to us – therefore, kind of automatically, we treat them well. If you are married and you have wedding pictures, you treat your wedding pictures well. Why? Because they are something that's very valuable to you. You don't just throw it here and there and everywhere. It is valuable, so you take care of it. Similarly, if your Dharma books are valuable, then you take care of them in the same way. But it's something to think about, to check up and observe your own mind. See if it makes a difference to you.

This is basically how you set up a shrine. The teachers, then the Buddha and the deities below, and then on your left (as you face the altar), or the Buddha's right, is the symbol of the Buddha's speech—a Dharma text, hopefully one of the perfection of wisdom sutras. On the Buddha's left, or on your right as you face the altar, a stupa or a bell, representing the Buddha's mind.

2. Obtain offerings properly and arrange them nicely

In front of these, you set up the offerings. There are various ways to do offerings. Sometimes you see a set of seven water bowls. This is one way of making offerings. Seven, because they talk about the seven qualities of enlightenment, sometimes called the seven kisses of enlightenment. Maybe seven water bowls to represent that.

Water is offered because it is easy to offer in the sense that we don't have a lot of attachment to it. Water becomes a very pure offering. The purpose of offering is not just to worship the Buddha, make devotion, and try and win the Buddha's good favor. The purpose of the offering, what we are really offering, is our pure intention, our confidence in the Triple Gem and our understanding of the Dharma. It is important that when we offer, we do so without attachment. Water is something that we can get easily. We aren't usually attached to it. Water becomes a very pure offering. I will come back in a few minutes to tell you specifically how to set up the water bowls. But I just want to briefly go over some of the different offerings now.

Sometimes you'll see the eight offerings. This is prevalent in tantric practice. You have the water for drinking, the water for washing the feet, flowers, incense, light, perfume, food and music. These eight offerings are based on ancient Indian culture. Whenever you had a guest into your house—and in India, remember it is very hot and dusty—first you give them something to drink, then you let them clean their dusty feet. You offer flowers because India is full of flowers, and incense and light, perfume (something to make the environment nice), then you offer them food and you have a good meal. After that, you have some entertainment or music. These eight offerings that you find in tantric practices come from this ancient Indian tradition. Even if you don't have a tantric initiation, you can still offer these eight. It is perfectly okay.

When you offer these eight things, they are in that specific order but you can offer more of one thing. For example, it is not necessary to have just one candle on your altar. You can have two candles or five candles, or you can have an electric light. It doesn't really matter. Some kind of light is nice. Similarly, you can offer different kinds of food and things like that. The Chinese have a custom of offering four or five pieces of fruit because that's how big the plates were. Some people would ask, "Can we offer six pieces of fruit?" or "Can we offer two pieces of fruit? Do I create negative karma if I offer only two pieces of fruit?" I said, "No, no, no, relax!" It is just the Chinese custom that you stack them up in a certain way with four or five pieces. But that's just a cultural thing. If you only have two pieces, offer two. If you have more, offer more. Okay? The idea is that you do it with a very good motivation.

Giving the best quality

Also, when you are offering, you want to offer the best quality to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. You can see here the purpose of offering. It is a very skilful way to help us overcome attachment and miserliness. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas from their side, they don't need our offerings. If you are enlightened, you don't need apples and oranges and incense sticks. But we need to make the offerings because we need to cultivate happiness in giving—to train our mind in that. We also need to get rid of our attachment and miserliness. One way to do that is to offer the things of best quality. You can see how our ordinary mind works: if you have a bunch of apples, you would like to keep the good ones for yourself and give the bad ones away. That's the way we usually are, isn't it? We put the bad ones on the altar and we keep the good ones. That's saying something about our way of thinking, isn't it? When we keep the best for ourselves and we offer the not-so-nice ones to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, it says something about our way of thinking.

If you really love somebody and care about them very deeply, you usually offer them the best quality. And you take the second best with a completely happy joyful mind because you care so much about the other person. Similarly here, when we are making offerings on the altar, we should really remember the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Remember their kindness towards us. Develop a sense of respect and admiration. And then have even more desire to bring them happiness than we have for our samsaric friends. Really try to offer the best things on the shrine.

Giving with an attitude of completely giving

When you offer things, you should offer them with an attitude of completely giving. Even though later on, as the caretaker of the shrine, you can take down the different offerings and you can give them to friends or you can eat them yourself. When you offer them, it is really important that you give them with an attitude of completely giving. You don't give with the attitude of "I'm offering to the Buddha so that I can

eat them later.”

When I taught in Singapore, I remember one day, we were having some big *puja* at the center so everyone brought lots of offerings. They put all the offerings on the altar. We did the practice, then we sat down to have lunch. Coincidentally, after lunch, when it was dessert time, they decided that it was the time the offerings needed to be taken off the altar. It was very curious because each person went up and took off the altar the thing that they had offered, and then passed it around to all the other people there. I said, “Hey! Hold on a minute. What’s going on here? How come you decided to clear the altar just when it happened to be dessert time? When we offer, did we really offer with a pure motivation? Did we really give it to the Buddha completely? Or did we just give it to the Buddha to watch it until we wanted it for ourselves? Did we really give it, or was our mind still clinging because when it came to passing it out, everybody went and got what they offered?”

The idea here is that when you offer, you really give. Of course, as the caretaker of your shrine, you can’t just leave the apples and oranges there and let them rot. You wouldn’t like rotten food on your plate. After a day or whatever, you take the offering down. But it’s good to do so with the remembrance that you are the caretaker of the shrine. You are the helper of the Buddha to clear away these offerings. You don’t do it with, “Oh! Now they are mine,” but, “Now the Buddha is distributing them to me and to others.” Then you may eat them yourself or you may give them to other people.

There are certain offering pujas, for example, the *tsog* offering (some of you may be familiar with) which is a special offering puja (the Lama Choepa puja). It’s usually done on the Tibetan tenth and twenty-fifth and it is a tantric practice. During this offering, you offer many things on the shrine and then in the middle of the puja, all the offerings, after they have been actually offered to the Three Jewels, are distributed among all of the people present. Many people who don’t know about this say, “Oh! Okay, we just did all these nice singing chants, now it’s time to have tea and eat!” They just see it as a kind of tea break in the middle of the puja. But it’s not a tea break. Well, it is, in that sense, but it’s not just, “now we are eating and munching something really nice.” With this *tsog* offering (“*tsog*” means assembly or gathering), you understand that these things have been offered to the Triple Gem. You imagine yourself as a Buddha and when the things are distributed, you are eating and enjoying these things as a Buddha. This is part of the meditation. It is not just, “Oh goody, now we get to eat biscuits and drink tea.” I’m saying this so that you will have a good attitude when you’re doing pujas and the offerings are being passed out.

How to dispose of the offerings

Also, things that have been offered to the Buddha, if you do discard them, should be placed in a high and clean place. In other words, when you take the water down after you have offered it on the altar, don’t flush it down the toilet. Instead take it outside and put it on the flowers. When you’ve offered some food and if you haven’t had time to eat it or give it to someone else, and it has gone bad, then you put it up somewhere. If you can, get it on your roof! Here our roof is slanted, it would all fall off, so I put it on the bench outside. Put it in a high and clean place, you don’t just give it to the dogs, because these are things that have been offered to the Buddha. When you eat them yourself, try and eat them with some kind of mindful feeling that you are eating these things that have been given to you by the Triple Gem.

Motivation for making offerings

When you make offerings, it is important to understand the reasons for making them. It is for us to develop a sense of joy at giving and to overcome our attachment and miserliness. It is important to cultivate a good motivation when you are making offerings. In other words, to cultivate the wish to become a Buddha for the benefit of others and to think, “I am making these offerings on the altar in order to become a Buddha for the benefit of others. By making these offerings, I’m purifying my negative qualities, and by making these offerings I’m also accumulating a lot of positive potential. I need to create this positive potential so that my mind is enriched. I can actually gain the realizations of the path for the benefit of all sentient beings.” It is important to cultivate the bodhicitta or the altruistic intention before you make the offering.

How to actually offer

As you make the offerings, you consecrate them with the syllables “Om Ah Hum.” Like when we do the food offering, we say “Om Ah Hum.” This is to consecrate the offerings. In other words, you have visualized the Triple Gem in the space in front. You are looking at your offerings as manifestations of blissful wisdom, and you are offering them in that way. The “Om Ah Hum” consecrates the visualization.

It is helping you to understand that you are not just offering ordinary apples and oranges and water but somehow by the power of your meditation, you're trying to see these things as incredibly pure substances. You are trying to see them as manifestations of blissful wisdom. You say "Om Ah Hum" to help consecrate.

As you are offering, really use your imagination. In the seven-limb prayer we say, "We make offerings, actual and mentally transformed." The ones that you place on the shrine are the actual offerings. While you are placing the actual ones on the shrine, you're also mentally transforming them. You might offer one apple, but you imagine from that apple comes seven other apples, and from those apples come seven others and so on. They are all manifestations of blissful wisdom. You have the whole sky completely filled with these beautiful offerings. Even though physically you might offer one single flower, or one donut—whatever it is, mentally you amplify it, you enlarge it. Often in the prayers, you hear the expression, "clouds of offerings." This is what we are talking about—imagining the whole sky with incredibly beautiful pure objects. When you visualize that, your own mind gets very happy and joyful. It's nice to imagine beautiful things, isn't it? It is important to think of the things that you are very attached to and imagine lots of them and offer them mentally.

Again, don't just offer to the Buddha all the things you don't like. You like peanut butter, but you offer the jelly to the Buddha because you don't like jelly and you keep the peanut butter to yourself. No! You offer the peanut butter and you also imagine lots of peanut butter. And it's not just the peanut butter that sticks to the roof of your mouth, but it's wisdom and bliss. It's this exquisite celestial offering. Really use your imagination. Be creative. This isn't hard because we are doing this kind of thing all the time, right? When you want to go out to dinner with your friend on Saturday night, you have a great visualization of how the dinner is going to taste, don't you? We visualize and imagine all the time. Here we're deliberately making them even greater and even more beautiful and then we offer them! Why? To free ourselves of all greed and attachment.

At the end, after you have made the offerings, you dedicate the positive potential for the benefit of all beings. Here you have complete constructive karma. You have the motivation (the altruistic intention), you have the action of offering the substances and the action of elaborating the offerings and consecrating them with "Om Ah Hum." You have the dedication, sharing or distributing your positive potential to all others. It is also important, while you are offering, to really imagine the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and truly think that they are receiving your things and are very happy to get them. In other words, you are not just putting apples and oranges in front of a statue.

There is a story of a little monk who stayed up late at night appearing at the meditation hall to see if the Buddha actually reaches out his hands and takes the apples. Don't think that you are just putting your offerings in front of a statue and that the Buddha doesn't really get it. By the force of your imagination recognize that the Buddhas and holy beings are there and what you are giving them is a purified offering. Imagine that they are enjoying that purified offering. Even though the actual apples and oranges stay there, they are enjoying something that is more transcendental than that. This makes your own mind happy when you imagine them enjoying something. It's like when you really care about somebody, and you imagine giving them a Christmas present, you think of how happy they will be and that makes you happy. It is a similar thing. Except here it's the holy objects, instead of just giving to the people that we are close to.

How to do the water offering

Let me just show you how to do the water offering. I'll show you how to do the seven water bowls. By the way, you don't always have to have seven bowls. There is a story about one great meditator who was very poor and had only one bowl. In the morning he used to offer one bowl of water to the Buddha. Whenever he had to have tea, he asked the Buddha if he could borrow the bowl back. The idea is that what you have, you offer. Offering doesn't necessarily mean offering many things. But on the other hand, if you have a lot of things, don't be miserly. If you don't have a lot of stuff, that doesn't matter—just offer whatever you have. You could offer water; it doesn't cost anything. But the idea is what you have, what you can offer purely without attachment, you do that. Then you offer a lot mentally—with your 'clouds' of offerings. But if you have the ability to make nice offerings, don't rationalize and say, "Well, it's okay to only offer a little and visualize the rest." What I am getting at is, don't rationalize here. Just do what is comfortable according to your capability.

With the water offering, you want to think that you are offering this wisdom nectar to the Buddhas and

bodhisattvas. You are not just offering ordinary water with chlorine in it; you are offering wisdom nectar. You transform the water.

Usually, to do this completely perfect, you light a stick of incense—incense represents pure ethical conduct—and then you take your bowls. By the way, you don't leave empty bowls upright on the altar—it's just like when you are hungry, you don't like somebody to offer you an empty bowl. Symbolically, we don't have empty bowls on the shrine as we don't want to offer the Buddha nothing. If your bowls are empty, they should be put upside down.

Before you make an offering, you have to clean the bowls, just like you clean your own plates before you eat. Have a clean cloth, not an old rag. The cloth represents the wisdom realizing emptiness. Then, any dirt or dust or whatever on the bowl, you think of it as the defilements of sentient beings. Then you wipe the bowl. You don't need to sit and scour it for half an hour. You wipe it out, cleaning the minds of sentient beings. Then you would hold the bowl over your incense stick, which represents pure ethical conduct. You hold the bowl over the incense to purify it, and then you stack it again face downwards. You do your other bowls in the same way, so you clean all of your bowls and they're all faced downwards. If don't have the kind of bowls that you can stack one on top of another, it doesn't matter. If you have the kind that you can only line up, just put them upside down before you offer them.

After you've cleaned them all, hold the stack of bowls right side up and pour some water into the top bowl as you are saying, "Om Ah Hum, ". You take out the top bowl, pour almost all the water out of it into the next bowl in the stack, leaving a little bit of water (in the top bowl), and then set this first bowl down (on the altar). In this way you are not offering an empty bowl—you have something in it. With the next bowl, you pour almost all of the water out and then you set it down. Place your bowls in a straight line, starting from your left going to your right. Again, this is a practice to develop mindfulness. We are not just throwing things all over. We are really taking the time to watch our relationships with the physical objects in our environment. We put them down quietly and gently as well as in a straight line, not zigzag. You leave about the distance of a grain of rice between them. In other words, don't put your bowls touching each other. Nor don't put them two inches apart. This is again a training in mindfulness. About the distance of a grain of rice. Don't ask me long grain or short grain. [Laughter].

Once you have all of them set down on the altar, each with a little bit of water, take your pitcher again and go back to the first bowl. It is nice to offer with both hands. Also, when you're putting fruit or anything on the altar, it is nicer if you can do with both hands. It is more respectful. I mean, when somebody gives you something, if they give it with both hands, it is different than if they were to just toss it across the room.

Now go back to the first bowl on the left and start to fill it up. Again, don't fill it completely to the top. Leave about the distance of a grain of rice from the top because you don't want it to be so full that it spills all over the place. That's just being sloppy. You don't want it so empty like you are being miserly. You want it somewhere in the middle. Consecrate it by saying "Om Ah Hum" three times as you are offering. You are imagining offering this blissful wisdom nectar to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and you are imagining that they are being very pleased with it. Do the first bowl and then do the second one, filling it up. Fill up each of the remaining bowls in the same way.

You may leave your bowls on your shrine for the duration of the day. In the evening, as it is getting dark, you take them down. When you set them up, you start from your left going to your right. When you take them down, start from your right, going to your left. You would take the first bowl on the right, pour the water out and turn the bowl upside down. You don't have to dry the bowl—just allow it to drain by itself—but put it upside down. Do the same for each of the remaining bowls. If you know the Vajrasattva mantra, you can recite the mantra while you are doing it, or you may just think of purifying sentient beings—removing all the sufferings and causes of suffering. Again, you are transforming the action. Take the water and put it on your plants or in your garden, some place like that.

Now, maybe I'd better stop and open it up for questions. There are some more things to say about offerings but I'll talk about them next time.

Review

To review a bit, right now we are on the section talking about how to set up a meditation session. It is important to meditate regularly, to do it everyday. Start by making your sessions short, making them

consistent so that you'll feel happy to do it. Have a separate place in your house where you meditate. Every time you see that place, you should feel good about it and want to go there. Set up a shrine. Some people like to have their shrines as a very private thing. That's okay. Other people like to have their shrines where other people can see them because when their friends come over, they get some good imprints on their mind. It is completely up to you.

You have your area, you clean it as a way of cleaning your mind. You think as you are sweeping, you're cleaning your defilements and those of sentient beings with the wisdom realizing emptiness. Then you set up your shrine with different photographs of the teachers that you've directly received teachings from, then the Buddha, then the meditational deities. The statues and pictures are the representations of the Buddha's body. Then you have the Buddha's speech on his right side, represented by the perfection of wisdom text, and then a stupa or a bell on his left side representing the Buddha's mind.

In front of these, you set up your offerings, remembering that the purpose of offering is to purify our mind and create positive potential, to free ourselves of attachment and miserliness and to develop the happiness of giving. We cultivate a good motivation, the altruistic intention. We make the actual offerings according to our own ability. If we're poor, we offer a little bit. If we're rich, we offer more. No matter how much we offer, we try and imagine it as beautiful and grandiose. We imagine it being blissful and that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are enjoying it so much. Then we make a dedication at the end of the offering.

There are different ways that you can set up offerings. You may set up the seven water bowls. Or if you don't have seven, do five or three or however many you want to. You may even do more than seven. Or, you can do the eight offerings—the water for drinking and washing the feet and so on. You could also offer flowers on your altar, lights, or different kinds of food – however you may want it. By the way, don't offer meat on the altar. That's not good because it's somebody else's body, and it usually involves killing. Try and make the offering something that is a vegetarian offering, unless it is a tsog puja. The tsog puja is a very special tantric practice where you have a little bit of meat, a little bit of alcohol, and in your meditation these substances are transformed. But that's a particular, special kind of offering.

When you dispose of the offerings, do so at the end of the day, with the attitude that you are taking care of the things for the Buddha. Either put them in a high and clean place or give them to other people or take them yourself.

The next session is a really interesting teaching about giving pure offerings without the five wrong livelihoods. I really like this one. Anyway, you have to come back next time to hear it [Laughter].

Questions and answers

[Audience:] Please repeat what the eight offerings are.

Firstly, water for drinking. Secondly, water for washing the feet. Then you have flowers. Flowers represent the qualities of the Buddha. Then you have incense, which is the fourth one, representing pure ethics. Fifth is light, representing wisdom. You have perfume, can't remember what it represents. The seventh is food. It represents samadhi because when you have samadhi you don't need to eat a lot—you nourish yourself through your meditation. And finally, you offer music. When you are offering these individual things you can also think about what the offerings represent. Like when you are offering flowers, "I am offering all the qualities of the stages and paths to enlightenment." When you offer incense or sweet smells, "I am offering pure ethical conduct." When you offer light, "I am offering the wisdom light of myself and others illuminating the darkness of ignorance." You can think in this way as you are offering all these different things.

[In response to audience:] The eighth offering is music. If you are doing tantric practice, then when you play your bell or your drum, this is music offering. That's why sometimes people offer seven and not eight water bowls. Or, if you are not doing that, then you may put a bell or a conch shell—they blow the conch shell to make a sound—on the altar. Or if you have any other kind of musical instrument... put your trumpet on the altar [laughter].

[In response to audience:] Not at that time, you don't. When you are doing certain rituals, then you do play music. If you like playing music, then you can think when you are playing music, that you're making

offerings to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, rather than just for enjoyment or because you want everybody to think you are such a classy musician. You can again transform the music and think you're making offerings.

[Audience:] If time is a problem, how do we fit these all in?

Well, you can do a big cleaning once a week—like when you do your house—and the rest of the time, you can just dust it very quickly. Doing the offering bowls really doesn't take too long. Once you are in the habit, it only takes about five minutes to do. Putting out a bowl of fruit doesn't take too long. It is nice to do the visualization and things so you get a really pleasant feeling from offering. If you are too busy in the morning, then when you come home from work, if you have a little bit more time after you have done your grocery shopping, for example, then before you enjoy the groceries yourself, you can take some things out and offer them.

[In response to audience:] How to balance it all? Again, what I am showing you here are just suggestions. You can take it and integrate it into your practice as you see fit, according to your schedule. Maybe on the weekends when you have more time, you can really do the offerings slowly and do a more elaborate visualization; take longer with the motivation and such when you have more time. Maybe on the days when you are working, you learn to abbreviate things. This can be very helpful because our mind needs to be able to make things extensive and we also need to be able to get to the point and make it concise. On workdays focus the mind, quick bodhicitta, quick visualization of clouds of offerings. Basically, do what feels comfortable to you and remember there are long and short ways of doing everything. This is the nice thing about the Tibetan tradition. There are long and short ways and according to your time, you can stretch it or shrink it.

Types of offering

[In response to audience:] There are many kinds of offering. There are offerings of physical things. There is offering of service and time and there is offering of your Dharma practice. All three are forms of offering. Offering your Dharma practice, in other words, your understanding of the teachings and cultivating those attitudes, is the best kind of offering. That type of offering can permeate offering your service and time, and offering physical objects. Whenever you help others, you can see that as an offering to the Buddha, because that's the kind of offering the Buddhas like.

[Audience:] How do we offer our food?

With the food offering (it's laid out on the back of the prayer sheet), visualize the Buddha at your heart, the food as nectar, and consecrate it. When you are offering food before meals, it is also very helpful to think, "I'm not offering this food just for my own enjoyment, I'm not offering it just for my own health and beauty, but I am offering it to keep my body alive so that I can use my life to practice the Dharma and to benefit others."

[Audience:] Please elaborate on the two levels of obscurations.

We have 'clean the dirt' and 'clean the stain.' 'Clean the dirt' is the first level of obscurations. It is called afflicted obscurations*—and this refers to the ignorance, anger, attachment, and the karma that causes rebirth—because the afflicted obscurations* are those things that keep us bound in cyclic existence. When you free yourself from those, you become an arhat.

The second level of obscurations are the cognitive obscurations*. The afflicted obscurations* are like the onions. The cognitive obscurations* are like the smell of the onions after the onions have been taken out. They are a subtler obscuration. This refers to the appearance of inherent existence. It is a false appearance to the mind and when you've eliminated this, then your mind is able to see all phenomena extremely clearly. In other words, you're able to have an omniscient mind and you have attained the state of full enlightenment or Buddhahood.

[Audience:] Why do the water bowls have to be taken down at the end of the day?

In one way, it is like cleaning up for the day—you take it down. This next one is difficult for us Westerners--that certain spirits might come and get frightened when they see their reflections in the water in the evening. You take down the bowls so they don't get frightened. But to me, it is more like cleaning up at the end of the day.

[Audience:] Can we leave the offerings on the altar for more than a day?

You can leave those more than one day but don't leave the flowers to the point where they are wilted.

Take them down if they're starting to droop.

Flowers representing impermanence

[In response to audience:] Actually, in the Theravada tradition whenever they offer flowers, they think of it as representing impermanence because a flower that looks so beautiful quickly decays. There is no sense in getting attached to anything.

Let's just sit and digest for a little bit. Try and remember, slowly applying the different things we have talked about.

#This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>

*'Afflicted obscurations' and 'cognitive obscurations' are the translations that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'deluded obscurations' and 'obscurations to omniscience' respectively.