

Preparatory Practices No. 3 to 5 (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. May 91

Contents (click on heading to view text)

- Advice on Visualization
- Constructing a Meditation Session
- The Six Preparatory Practices – Cont'd
 - *Preparatory Practice 3 – Cont'd:*
 - Generating Oneself as a Buddha
 - The Four Immeasurables
 - *Equanimity*
 - *Love*
 - *Compassion*
 - *Joy*
 - *Preparatory Practice 4: Visualization of the Merit Field*
 - *Preparatory Practice 5: Offering the Seven Limb Prayer*
 - Prostration
 - Offering
 - Confession
 - *Feeling guilty is useless*
 - *4 parts to confession*
 - Rejoicing
 - Requesting the Buddha and Spiritual Masters to Remain
 - Requesting Them to Turn the Wheel of Dharma
 - Dedication
- Review
- Questions and Answers

Advice on Visualization

Here, we are doing the visualization and trying to generate the feelings relatively quickly. But when at home, try and go over it slowly to develop our practice. The more you do it on your own and develop it, then when you come to a situation like this where we do it quickly, the more your mind can click into it. Because your mind is already trained, you don't need to think as much. It's like when you first learn to drive a car, you have to first get your bearings and figure out where all the gears are. But after you have done it for a while, you will be able to get into it very quickly. The practice becomes automatic. We can take our time and do it slowly to get the feeling. Then at other times we can do it more quickly and try and click in.

Try to get as clear a visualization as you can. But don't get too hung up on it. The most important thing is that you get a sense of the presence of the holy beings, and the sense that you are leading all sentient beings and turning to those who have the power, skill and wisdom to guide us. That's more important than trying to see every single detail of their appearance.

Constructing a Meditation Session

We are at the point in the lamrim where we are learning how to construct a meditation session because all of the other topics, starting from 'How to relate to a spiritual master' through altruism, emptiness and beyond that, are topics to be meditated upon in a meditation session. We are now learning the basic structure of a meditation session. After this, we will start going into the basic topics that we will be meditating on.

The Six Preparatory Practices – Cont'd

It is important to do meditation daily, putting aside a reasonable amount of time for us to do that. At the

beginning of the meditation session, we do the six preliminaries or the six preparatory practices:

1. First we clean the room and set up the shrine.
2. Then we procure offerings in a legitimate fashion without any of the five wrong livelihoods or without creating negative karma. Also, we offer the offerings with a pure motivation, not for reputation or to impress anybody.

Preparatory Practice 3 – Cont'd

3. And then we sit in the sevenfold position and try to put our mind into a neutral state. We do this by doing the breathing meditation to get rid of the scattered mind or attached mind, by meditating on patience to get rid of anger, and by meditating on inhaling light if our mind is dull. Having done that, we visualize the objects of refuge. Then we take refuge. Taking refuge is determining for ourselves what we believe in and whose guidance we are going to follow. After that we reflect on why we are following the guidance of the Triple Gem, that is, we set our motivation. We cultivate love, compassion and altruism. When we recite the prayer, "I take refuge until I am enlightened...", we are taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, the altruistic intention.

Generating Oneself as a Buddha

Imagine that a replica of Shakyamuni Buddha comes out of him – you know like in cartoons how you have one thing coming out of another one? We have all seen that in the movies. [Laughter] The replica comes to the top of our head, dissolves into light, and melts into us. (Remember Shakyamuni Buddha is your root spiritual master in that form, and that they are all made of light.) At that point, we meditate briefly on emptiness. We are merging our body, speech and mind with the Buddha's body, speech and mind. It is not like I become the Buddha or the Buddha becomes me and we are both inherently existent. Rather, we are exactly the same because we are both non-inherently existent. That is how we merge. We are looking into the deeper way that things exist.

It is very interesting at this point. The Buddha has melted into light and dissolved into you. You contemplate that there is no 'I' that is separate from your body and mind. There is no 'I' that is separate from your aggregates. You may recall that at times when we are really angry: "I'm angry!" it feels like there is an 'I' in there, doesn't it? Some separate little guy that is sitting in there. But in actual fact, there is nothing in there that is separate from the body and mind. If we take away the body and we take away the mind, are you going to find anybody else in there who is running the show? Is there somebody else in there who is the master of the body and mind, who is pulling the switches? Nobody else is there.

And similarly, with the Buddha or with our spiritual master, apart from their body and mind, there is no other guru. There is no other Buddha. Inside the Buddha, there is not a personality, there is not a self that is pulling the strings and running the show. The Buddha exists by being merely labeled 'Buddha' on the basis of the body and mind. There is the body. There is the mind. On top of that, there is the conception that gives the label 'Buddha'. There is no other Buddha besides that. If you look in the body, you are not going to find something that is the Buddha. If you look in the mind, you can't find one thing that is the Buddha. And yet when you are not looking, when you are not searching, when you are not analyzing, there is the appearance of a Buddha on top of the combination of body and mind. This appearance has arisen due to our conceptual mind labeling 'Buddha' on the basis of the body and mind.

Similarly with ourselves. There is no little guy in there who is running the show, making the decisions, who is *me*. Without the body and mind, there is no other person to be found anywhere. You look all through your body. There is no person that is *you*. Your little toe is not you, your heart is not you, your brain is not you. Similarly, we look through all the different parts of our mind. Can we find one mental characteristic that we can say: "That one is me and all the rest aren't!"? Let's say we take our anger and say: "I am my anger!" Then you can never be generous, because you are only anger. We can't isolate any particular characteristic and say: "That one is me and none of the others are me." There is nothing that we can isolate in the body or in the mind and say "That one is me." So the body and mind are empty of some little guy in there that's running the show. We are empty of having some self that is separate from our body and mind.

And yet, when we are not analyzing, when we are not searching, there is the appearance of 'I' on top of the combination of the body and the mind, which is the basis. We have our concept that labels: "Oh, I". Or we label John, we label Sally. This is a label that is given on top of the basis, but there is nothing in

there that is that person.

On that level of existence, we and the Buddha are exactly the same. There is no independent personality. No separate personality. In the deeper way of existence, we are both exactly the same. We are both empty of having some self that is running the show. In this way, our mind merges with the Buddha's mind.

And then, because you have gotten rid of all your wrong conceptions about who you are, you are no longer clinging: "Here am I. I'm five feet five inches tall. I am this color skin. I am this age. I am this nationality. I am this profession, and so on." You are no longer having all these rigid solid concepts about who you are. You realize there is no guy running the show in there. This frees our mind from all these prisons we put ourselves in by who we think we are. From within that empty space of not having a separate self that is running the show, then we can imagine ourselves appearing as the Buddha. We have purified the wrong conception of ourselves, and this leaves the empty nature or pure nature of the mind, the Buddha nature. Out of this, we can generate ourselves in the appearance of the Buddha.

To summarize, we have the refuge objects in front of us. A replica of the Buddha comes out, comes on top of our head, dissolves into light, and enters us. We meditate on the emptiness of ourselves and the emptiness of inherent existence of the guru and the Buddha. Out of that emptiness, or within that emptiness, we generate ourselves in the physical form of the Buddha. It is not your old body transforming into the Buddha. Having gotten rid of all these wrong conceptions of yourself, you are letting your own Buddha nature, you are letting your own wisdom, appear in that pure form.

You are the Buddha now. Imagine light in your heart. The light emanates from your heart and goes out and touches all the other sentient beings. It goes to the people you know, the people you don't know, all the living creatures in all the different realms, all the different life forms. As this light touches them, it pacifies all their suffering and problems. You have become a miracle worker. [laughter] You pat all the people who are in pain. You imagine the light comes and touches them and it relieves their pain, whether it is hunger or thirst or mental confusion or despair. Whatever pain it is, it is removed.

And then the light continues and it gives them all the realizations of the path: all the qualities that they need to become Buddhas themselves, all the qualities they need to develop to have happy minds. You purify them, you give them all the qualities of the realizations of the path, and then you imagine that they too become Buddhas.

Now, you are in the form of the Buddha, surrounded by other Buddhas. You are completely transforming your ordinary conception of who you are and who others are and how you relate to them. You are imagining the perfect world that you want to see come about. You are imagining it here and now. When you are in medical school, you imagine going out working with patients, giving them medicine, curing them, and how happy they are going to be when they are cured. The medical students imagine the doctor they are going to be and doing all the doctor actions and getting the results. Because they are able to imagine all these, they have the courage and make the effort to go through medical school. Similarly, by imagining the future Buddha that we want to become and being able to have that incredibly good effect and influence on others, it helps us to see what we can become, what others can become, and this gives us the courage and the determination to practice the path to make that happen.

This is a very special kind of visualization. I think you will probably find it only in the Tibetan tradition. It is actually quite profound when you start to do it. It is interesting too, because as you imagine the light going out from your heart and purifying sentient beings, giving them realizations and qualities, transforming them into Buddhas, then you have to completely let go of all your conceptions of who they are. All the people whom you are mad at, whom you think are such idiots and jerks: you transform them into the Buddha. They aren't idiots and jerks anymore!

All the people you are afraid of and all the situations you shake in your shoes when you go into: you imagine them and you radiate light into them. Instead of relating out of fear with people, you are relating to them with you as the Buddha and them as suffering sentient beings. You purify them. You give them realizations. You transform them into the Buddha. You develop a whole new way of relating to others. You completely let go of that very concrete, fearful boxed-in conception that you have of others which conditions so much how you interact with them.

When you transform all beings into Buddhas, you have transformed the whole environment into a pure land, even purifying the Puget Sound area here around us. You purify the rainforest. It is no longer a rainforest with worms and birds; you've transformed all of them into Buddhas. There is a Buddha sitting in the trees, and the trees are all made of light...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

The Four Immeasurables

Loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity – the Four Immeasurables comes next. By cultivating these Four Immeasurables, we are freeing ourselves from the obstacles of becoming a Buddha and also help others to be free from those same obstacles. There is a short version of the prayer and there is also a longer version. It is worthwhile to read the longer one because it goes into a little bit of depth that makes us think in a different way.

Equanimity

In the longer version, it starts out with equanimity. In the shorter version, equanimity is the last one. Don't expect things to be the same. [Laughter] The first verse is:

How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were to abide in equanimity, free of bias, attachment and anger. May they abide in this way. I shall cause them to abide in this way. Guru-deity, please inspire me to be able to do so.

In the first line, you are saying how wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were to abide in equanimity, free of bias (which holds some people close and others distant), attachment (which clings to the ones close to us) and anger (which discards the ones we don't like). How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were free of that. But we can't leave it at 'how wonderful it would be'. We generate a little bit more energy, so the second sentence is: 'May they abide in that way.' How wonderful it would be if they abide in equanimity, may they do it! More energy, more force.

Then taking responsibility: 'I shall cause them to abide in this way'. We are not just saying how wonderful it would be and may they be that way, but "I am going to engage, I am going to make this happen!" But since we are limited beings, we need some inspiration, we need some guidance, we need some help ourselves. So in the last line, we request the Guru deity – the Guru, the deity, the Buddha, all of whom have the same essence – to inspire us, to bring this about, to make this thing that we are saying 'how wonderful it would be' actually happen. Do you see the progression of how we are going here?

Love

The second verse is love, the wish for others to have happiness and its causes:

How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings had happiness and its causes. May they have these. I shall cause them to have these. Guru-deity, please inspire me to be able to do so.

It is incredible just to think about that. 'How wonderful that would be!' Isn't it incredible? And then 'May that happen!' Energy comes. 'I am going to cause that to happen. I am going to get involved. I am not going to sit around and twiddle my thumbs and daydream. I am going to do something. I am going to ask for help from those who are more capable than me.' We say: 'Guru deity, please inspire me to bring this about.'

Compassion

The third verse is compassion, the wish that others be freed from their difficulties and suffering and their causes:

How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were free from suffering and its causes. May they be free. I shall cause them to be free. Guru-deity, please inspire me to be able to do so.

Here, we shouldn't see difficulties and suffering as only a headache, toothache, hunger and similar things. Of course these are sufferings and difficulties, but we should think beyond giving just simple

remedy, beyond giving an aspirin and some food. We should ask what is the root cause of all these difficulties? It's the ignorance, attachment and anger that bind us to cyclic existence. When we want to free others from their suffering and its causes, it means we want to remove them from their anger, attachment and ignorance that make them get born, get old, get sick and die, over and over again. We are getting at a deeper root of the suffering, a deeper layer of suffering. We are not just giving food. We want to give Dharma teachings. We want to give guidance on the path so that other beings can actually transform their minds and free themselves.

We want to free beings not just from hunger, but from the mind that makes us take the body that gets hungry. 'How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were free from suffering and its causes.' Think about how wonderful it would be. And then 'May they be free. I shall cause them to be free. Guru-deity, please inspire me to be able to do so.' The mind develops with each line in the verse.

Joy

The fourth one is joy:

How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were never parted from upper rebirth and liberation's excellent bliss. May they never be parted. I shall cause them never to be parted. Guru-deity, please inspire me to be able to do so.

'How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were never parted from upper rebirth and liberation's excellent bliss.' It would be wonderful if they were never separated from upper rebirth. In other words, may they always have good rebirths, not born as animals or other lower realm beings. Not only that, but it would be wonderful if they were never separated from the excellent bliss of liberation, to never be separated from the state of being free of anger, attachment and ignorance and all the sufferings that are their effect. And then 'May they never be parted from this excellent bliss. I shall cause them never to be parted. Guru Deity, please inspire me to be able to do so.'

It is good sometimes to just sit and meditate. You can spend a long time thinking about these Four Immeasurables, and cultivating them in your mind. You don't have to do it only on your meditation seat. You can also do it in the middle of a traffic jam. In the middle of the expressway, when it is all blocked up, and everybody is upset and angry, "How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were to abide in equanimity, free of bias, attachment and anger." Sit there in the middle of the traffic jam and think this! You can feel the effect then.

Some people make tapes of the prayers and put them in the car. Instead of listening to other things that we usually listen to, we can listen to some of the prayers or teachings. It is very good that way.

Preparatory Practice 4: Visualization of the Merit Field

Next we visualize what they call the merit field, or the field of positive potential. You can visualize the merit field in exactly the same way as you visualized the objects of refuge. Sometimes, the visualization is changed slightly. When we visualize the refuge objects, we have one large throne and five smaller thrones on it [for the Buddha, teachers, lineage lamas], and then the circles of deities, Buddhas, bodhisattvas and other holy beings. Here, with the merit field, you have a tree with layers of petals on it. Your root teacher is in front of the Buddha at the top of the tree. The different groups of spiritual masters are in the four directions. On the petals going down the tree, you have the rings of deities, Buddhas, bodhisattvas and other holy beings. You can do it either way. It might be easier for you to keep the same visualization.

As I said before, some people find it very difficult to do this complex visualization with many figures. It is possible, if you want to, to just imagine the sole figure of the Buddha instead of all the lamas, Buddhas and deities. Imagine that the Buddha encompasses the essence of the Buddha, all the spiritual masters, all the Buddhas, the Dharma and all the Sangha. You think of the Buddha's mind as the Buddhas, the Buddha's speech as the Dharma, and the Buddha's body as the Sangha. The body, speech and mind of the Buddha represent the three refuges. This is if you want to visualize simply a single figure of Shakyamuni Buddha instead of the whole big assembly.

Preparatory Practice 5: Offering the Seven Limb Prayer

Reverently I prostrate with my body, speech and mind,
And present clouds of every type of offering, actual and mentally transformed.

I confess all my negative actions accumulated since beginningless time,
And rejoice in the virtues of all holy and ordinary beings.
Please remain until cyclic existence ends,
And turn the wheel of Dharma for sentient beings.
I dedicate all the virtues of myself and others to the great enlightenment.

Having visualized the merit field in front of us, what we want to do is to offer the Seven Limb Prayer. You are probably wondering why the assembly is called the field of positive potential, or the merit field. Just as we can plant things in an ordinary field and get results, so too, we can generate different attitudes towards the field of holy beings and get the results of realizations. We are going to try and generate seven different attitudes in respect to this field of positive potential, and what we grow is the positive potential and the realizations as we are generating these attitudes in the presence of holy beings.

The seven attitudes that we want to generate in respect to the merit field: prostration, offering, confession or revealing, rejoicing, asking them to remain or to live long, asking them to turn the Dharma wheel, and then dedication. With the fifth and sixth we ask them to remain and to turn the Dharma wheel. Sometimes they are reversed in other versions of the prayer. So don't be surprised. There are different ways of presenting things.

The reason why we want to generate these seven attitudes is because we want to gain the realizations of the path for the benefit of others. Gaining realizations depends on creating the causes for those realizations. Realizations don't fall out of the sky. The Buddha doesn't wave a magic wand and give them out. We have to create the causes! We have to transform our own mind by creating the causes of the realizations. That's what this prayer is about.

To give another analogy, when you have your garden, the first thing you have to do in your garden is pull out the weeds. You can't plant anything if there're weeds all over the place. You've got to get rid of the weeds. Then you have to put in fertilizer. You have to water it. You have to have some sunshine. Then you plant the seeds in the ground. After this you can sit and relax because you have created all the causes for the seeds to grow. You don't have to sit there and make them grow. You have created all the causes. The seeds will do it by themselves.

What is this analogy relating to? Our mind is like a field. We have to pull out the weeds, in other words, get rid of negative karma. We have to put in the fertilizer, water and sunshine, in other words, imbue our mind with positive potential or merit. Then we plant the seeds, which is like listening to teachings. We let the seeds germinate as we contemplate and meditate on the teachings. Then the flowers grow – we gain the realizations. Pulling out the weeds and adding the fertilizer is a very important part of the process. If you are really impatient to plant the seeds and you skip all the preparation you have to do, you're not going to get any flowers! You didn't prepare the ground right.

Similarly, in our meditation, we need to take the time to purify and accumulate positive potential. In this way, the seeds of listening to teachings can grow in our mind. Doing these practices is very helpful for transforming your attitude. I remember when I first went to Kopan, Lama Yeshe had us do a Vajrasattva practice. This is one particular manifestation of the Buddha whose specialty is purification. I went into the three-month retreat on Vajrasattva, and all through the retreat I was asking: "What does it mean to purify? How do I know I am purifying?" My mind was just completely bananas! All I am thinking about is myself for three months, re-running movies of my whole life. "I am not purifying anything!" [Laughter]

After the retreat, I went back to Kopan, and I was listening to teachings again, and all of a sudden it was like: "Oh wow, is this what Lama Zopa Rinpoche has been saying this whole time?" I understood something that I didn't understand before. Somehow the mind got it. Something clicked. To me that showed that there was some purification. Some mental obstacles had been removed due to having done this retreat. It was made very obvious to me as I was at this course and beginning to understand the Dharma more.

At times in your practice, you may find your mind getting stuck. We all feel this way sometimes. When this happens, it is symptomatic of our having a lot of obscurations and negative karma. It is good at this time to spend more time on these seven practices. Sometimes you feel a lack of energy. Or you are having very strange thoughts and your mind is quite rambunctious. Then it is very helpful to do these seven practices to try to cut that energy out.

But like I said (I told you about my experience in the retreat), while I was doing it, I was thinking: "This isn't doing anything! All I am doing is thinking about me!" Don't expect some great experience when you are doing these practices. You just have to do them as best as you can. Believe me, when you are purifying, all your garbage comes up. [Laughter] It is like, if you have a really dirty cloth, when you put it in the water, what comes out? All the junk! The water was clean and the cloth didn't look too dirty, but when you put the cloth in the water, yucko! [Laughter] It is very often like that when you start to do purification practices. There is so much mental garbage coming up.

Sometimes even physical garbage comes up. You get sick. Things like that happen. You have to be able to put these into perspective and not get overwhelmed. Just remember when you are washing the cloth that the more dirt you see in the water, the cleaner the cloth is going to be. When you are purifying, the more disturbed and the more berserk your mind becomes... [Laughter] Just keep it in perspective. Don't cling on to: "Oh my mind has gone berserk!" but just think, "This is coming up because I am cleaning the 'cloth'." Let go of it.

Prostration

The first limb is prostration: 'Reverently, I prostrate with my body, speech and mind.' This one, I think, is particularly to shake us Americans, up. [Laughter] Of all the countries in the world, it is America that doesn't like to show respect to others. In America, nothing is sacred. You criticize the political leaders. You criticize religious leaders. We tear down everything we can. Part of our national humor is humiliating and making fun of the people in power, isn't it? We love it! [Laughter] The idea of showing respect, in this land of 'equality', is almost like an anathema to us. We are so 'equal' that we feel the right to disparage each other. It doesn't seem like we are being equal; we are really going to the other extreme. This limb is helping us to develop some respect for others by recognizing their qualities instead of always picking faults and criticizing. Instead of putting ourselves up above others as their judge when we judge the government and when we judge everybody else, we are now going to put ourselves a little bit lower, look at others' good qualities and pay respect to those qualities.

Now why do we need to pay respect? Here in this case we are paying respect to holy beings. The holy beings don't need our respect. It doesn't help the Buddha at all to have our respect. The Buddha doesn't get off on our making prostrations to them. [Laughter] He doesn't go back to the Pure Land saying: "Hey, you know, I got all these guys really trained well." [Laughter] The Buddha doesn't get anything from our showing respect. The one who benefits from the whole thing is us! Why? Because when we can look at others' good qualities and show respect to them, what we are doing is developing an aspiration and an openness in ourselves to develop those same qualities. We are recognizing the qualities that we admire. We are seeing, "Thank Heaven, there are other beings who have those, even though we don't." We are opening ourselves up to be influenced in a positive way by those beings so that we can develop those same qualities. That is the purpose of showing respect.

That goes not only for holy beings, but for anybody we meet on the street. We can learn something from everybody. If we get into a critical, negative mental state, we prevent ourselves from benefiting from others. As long as we pick at people's faults and put ourselves above, we can't learn anything from anybody else. We completely block ourselves by our critical mind. But as soon as we can look at other people's good qualities, even if somebody has ten bad qualities and one good one, if we look at their one good quality, we are benefiting because we are opening ourselves up to developing that same good quality ourselves by acknowledging it in others and trying to learn from them. This is what prostration is all about.

Prostrations can be done with the body, speech and mind. We often think prostration is just physical, just an action of the body. It is not. In fact, physical prostration becomes mere gymnastics if you don't have the mental prostration accompanying it. If you are doing physical prostration but your mind is all over the place, you are not meditating and trying to be aware, then you might as well go to the gym and work out. Except that it is cheaper to do prostrations. [Laughter] Physical prostrations is what we do with our body, which I will show you in a minute.

Verbal prostration is saying either the mantra out loud: *Om namo manjushriye namo sushriye namo uttama shriye soha*, or it is saying this line: "I prostrate with my body, speech and mind." The verbal expression is verbal prostration.

Mental prostration is imagining the merit field, the field of positive potential and developing an attitude of respect and admiration towards them. This is the most important one. If you don't have that feeling of respect towards them, even if you are doing the verbal and the physical prostration, nothing is going to change much in the mind. Mental prostration is your attitude of confidence and faith and the visualization, feeling like you are in the presence of the holy beings. Verbal prostration is saying the mantra or saying the line of prostration, or whatever verse of prostration there is. There are different versions of the seven limb prayer.

There are different ways to do the physical prostrations. The simplest way is just to go like this. [Hands together at the heart, thumbs tucked inside.] When you are sitting on the upper bunk of an Indian train and you need to do your prayers but you don't want to arouse anybody's attention, you just go like this. The right hand symbolizes the method aspect of the path: Compassion, generosity, ethics and so on. The left hand symbolizes the wisdom aspect of the path. You are putting the hands together, which symbolizes that you need to conjoin method and wisdom to have full Enlightenment. In other Buddhist traditions – the Thais, Sri Lankans, the Chinese – the hands are flat with all thumbs and fingers extended. In the Tibetan tradition, the thumbs are tucked inside. This is to symbolize that we are not coming to the Buddha empty-handed; we are holding a jewel and offering it to the Buddha.

Now, if you are more ambitious than that, then there is a short prostration, or what they call the five-point prostration. Five points of your body are in contact with the ground: your two knees, your two hands and your head. Your feet are already in contact with the ground. They don't count towards the five.

To do the short prostration, first with your hands together, you touch your crown. That symbolizes gaining the realizations of full Enlightenment, the crown protrusion of the Buddha. Then you touch your forehead, and you think this is purifying the negative actions of your body; you are purifying the negative actions of killing, stealing and unwise sexual behavior. You are also gaining the inspiration of the Buddha's body.

Then we touch our throat, and we are purifying lying, slander, harsh words, idle talk. We also imagine gaining the inspiration of the Buddha's speech: all the good qualities of speech, saying the right thing at the right time in the right way to affect people in a beneficial way.

Then we touch our heart. It purifies the mental actions of coveting, maliciousness and wrong views. We imagine gaining the inspiration of the Buddha's mind: the Buddha's wisdom, compassion, patience and so on.

Then we put our hands flat on the ground. Do not spread your fingers or clench your fists. You put your hands down on the ground first, then your knees, and then you touch your head to the ground, and then you push yourself up. You come up quickly, symbolizing that you come out of samsara quickly. And while you are prostrating, you imagine much light coming from the merit field, purifying you and inspiring you.

This is the short prostration. This is what we usually do before teachings. Now, sometimes people want to do the practice of a hundred thousand prostrations, which is a very intense purification practice. In such cases, it is very good to do the long prostrations, if you are able to do it.

When you feel completely blocked up, stuck, frustrated, guilty and down on yourself, it is very effective to do many prostrations. It is very helpful. Prostration is especially good against pride. It is an antidote to pride, so it is very important.

Offering

The second limb is offering: 'I present clouds of every type of offering, actual and mentally transformed'. This is the antidote to attachment and miserliness. The actual offerings are the ones that we've put on our altar. The mentally transformed ones are imagining the whole sky being filled with all sorts of beautiful objects of offering. You can imagine mountains, lakes, ponds, trees, space and clouds, or Porsches or BMWs, [Laughter] VCRs – whatever you consider beautiful. You imagine these completely filling the whole sky, all sorts of beautiful things made of light, and you offer them all to the field of positive potential, to the Buddhas and all the holy beings. Making offerings like this accumulates a lot of positive potential.

Confession

The third branch is confession: 'I confess all my negative actions accumulated since beginningless time'. Some people don't like the word 'confession' because it reminds them too much of the Catholic Church. An alternative, and probably a better translation, is 'to reveal'. The Tibetan word is 'shag', which means to split open, to reveal. It refers to being honest with ourselves. Instead of hiding all of our garbage and mistaken actions, we acknowledge them and do something to remedy them.

Feeling guilty is useless

This is the complete opposite of feeling guilty. When we feel guilty, we have a very hard time being honest about our mistakes. We want to hide them. When we feel guilty, we often blame ourselves for things that aren't our fault. We exaggerate things. When we feel guilty, we are completely immobilized. We aren't doing anything to remedy the situation. We are only making it worse by spiraling around in our own mire of confused guilt. Confessing or revealing our negativities is a completely different ball game from feeling guilty.

4 parts to confession

When we are confessing, there are four parts to it.

The first one is having regret. Recognizing we made a mistake and feeling regret for it. Not guilt, but just regret. They say it is like somebody who drank poison. After you drank poison, you don't feel guilty. But you certainly regret it. You don't want the result to come. Regret is like that.

The second one is called the power of the basis. I prefer to describe it as reconciling our relationships. When we do negative actions, it is usually against either the holy beings or other sentient beings. Against holy beings like Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, we might have misappropriated temple funds, stolen Buddha statues, taken things from the temples or from the Sangha that aren't ours. Or we have lied to our spiritual masters, we have stolen their things. We slandered them. We criticized the Buddha. Things like that. We have also committed negative actions towards other sentient beings, other people or animals.

We have damaged our relationships with the holy beings or the sentient beings when we acted in destructive ways like the above. The second power is the one of restoring relationships. What we are trying to do is to restore the relationships, to improve the relationships. How do we improve our relationship with holy beings? Well, instead of being critical of them, defaming them or stealing their things, we take refuge in them. We turn to them for guidance with a mind of confidence or faith, trust and conviction. In this way we restore the relationship with them. We generate a constructive attitude towards them.

When we acted negatively towards other sentient beings, it is often done out of jealousy or attachment or anger, some kind of disturbed mind. What we do to reconcile the relationship is to generate love and compassion towards them. We generate the intention of becoming a Buddha in order to benefit them. This is the best way to restore the relationship that we have harmed previously by acting negatively. Therefore the second power is taking refuge and generating the altruistic intention.

The third power is to make a determination not to do it again. For a period of time that you feel comfortable with, you make a determination not to do it. You make a New Year resolution and you try and keep it. This is very important because the stronger our intention to not do it again, the more courage we will have to not do it again.

The fourth power is to do some remedial actions. Making charity, doing community service, helping those in need, making prostrations or offerings, doing meditation, reading Dharma books, printing Dharma books, making Buddha statues, reciting mantra, meditating on emptiness – any kind of spiritual practice or virtuous actions.

When we purify, the most important thing to have is the regret. Without regret, the other ones are worthless. If we can't acknowledge our mistakes and actions to ourselves and to the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, then even if we try and do the other three, we are lacking the basic thing, which is regretting the actions. It is good to spend some time to generate regret. Remember, it is not guilt, but it does require being honest with oneself and it can bring about a tremendous sense of relief. We might have done things in the past that we wish we hadn't done and we are so ashamed that we can't even bear to think

about it. But even if we don't think about them, they are still there. It is like hiding all your dirty laundry under your bed. It is still there even if you don't look at it. But if you take all the dirty laundry out from under the bed and put it in the washing machine, the dirt will be gone! It becomes clean.

Similarly, we have to take out all our dirty mental laundry [Laughter] and do something about it. Initially, we might feel: "Oh, I won't be able to look at all these!" But actually, it is a tremendous sense of relief when you can actually admit it to yourself, admit it to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and then start to clean it!

'I confess all my negative actions accumulated since beginningless time.' We are not just confessing things that happened in this life, but things that we could very well have done in previous lives also. Who knows who we have been born as and what we have done in previous lives. It is good to also purify those things. Even though we don't know specifically what they are, we can make some guesses – we know the variety of negative actions that people do in the world and we can assume we've probably done all of them before. You can never confess too much, so don't worry about: "Oh I confess killing a human being but I didn't kill any this life. I won't confess anything I didn't do." Well, having had countless previous lives, we've probably killed some human beings. It is good to bring this up and generate regret for it.

Rejoicing

The fourth limb: 'And rejoice in the virtues of all holy and ordinary beings.' Rejoicing is the way to increase our merit. It's called the lazy person's way to create positive potential. When you rejoice, you do not even need to exert the energy to do the virtuous actions. All you are doing is being happy that other people did them. And yet this is a very important practice. A big problem in our spiritual practice and in our life in general, is jealousy. We get very jealous of people who are better than we are, who have more than we do. The jealousy destroys us internally. The antidote to jealousy is to rejoice at people's good qualities and rejoice at their virtues and happiness. If we were the best in the world, the world would be a sorrowful place. And we just got down to saying in the Four Immeasurables how wonderful...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

We rejoice in the virtues of ordinary beings, beings who don't have a direct perception of emptiness. We also rejoice in the virtues of holy beings, beings who have a direct perception of emptiness. We rejoice in the happiness and virtues of all beings. Here they are, having happiness and having good qualities and we didn't even have to do anything to let them have it! Why not rejoice? When we are jealous, we are totally unhappy and miserable. When we rejoice, the other person is happy and we are happy. It's just a matter of changing the attitude.

Requesting the Buddha and Spiritual Masters to Remain

The fifth limb: 'Please remain until cyclic existence ends.' This is requesting the Buddhas and our spiritual masters to please remain until cyclic existence ends. It is asking them to have a long life, asking them to guide us from now until we attain enlightenment. In other words, we need them in all of our future lives. May they not get fed up with us and go back to their meditation on emptiness and say: "Who needs these guys?" [Laughter]

Requesting Them to Turn the Wheel of Dharma

The sixth limb: 'And turn the wheel of Dharma for sentient beings.' We request the Buddhas and our spiritual masters to turn the wheel of Dharma for sentient beings. This is very important. We are asking for teachings. Turning the Dharma wheel means to give us teachings. This is very important. We are not shy to ask for things that we like: "Can I have another piece of chocolate cake?" The things we value, we go for them. Here, what we are doing is having that same attitude, but it is based on a profound respect for the teachings, seeing their value and their benefit in our life. Therefore we ask for them.

This is important because if we take our teachers and the teachings for granted, then we lose out. In other words, teachings aren't given because our teachers like to teach or because they need to teach. It is all done for our benefit. As much as we appreciate it, then that much we benefit from it. As much as we appreciate it, that much more we ask for it. It is important to ask for teachings to help us remember that teachings are something to appreciate. It also creates the karmic cause to be able to receive teachings. If we don't do this, we could be born in a land where there is no religious freedom, where

there is no opportunity to have teachings. We definitely need to create the cause to have Dharma teachings and not take this situation for granted.

In 1975 when I first met the Dharma, it was extremely difficult in America to get teachings. There were very few teachers and hardly any Dharma centers. There was virtually nothing in English except the stuff that you could barely understand – full of Sanskrit and Pali and written in very weird English. It was very difficult at that time. Since then, a lot of progress has been made. There are Buddhist publishing companies. There is a wealth of information. There are many teachers. These arise because of our karma! Our karma created in previous lives when we had requested for teachings, appreciated the teachings and made prayers to be able to meet teachers and have teachings. If we like this situation we are experiencing now, it is important to continue to create the cause to have it happen again in the future.

Dedication

The seventh limb: 'I dedicate all the virtues of myself and others to the great enlightenment.' All the positive potential that we have created by doing the above six, instead of hoarding it all for ourselves, we are now dedicating it for the enlightenment of all beings. We are sharing it.

These preliminary practices - purifying, accumulating positive potential – are very, very important, and I've presented them in a very general way here.

Review

Let's review a little bit. We visualize the refuge objects. We take refuge. We generate a positive intention. Then a replica of the Buddha who is the same entity as our spiritual master comes on top of our head, dissolves into light and dissolves into us. Our body, speech and mind become the same as the body, speech and mind of the Buddha. We remember that on the deepest level of existence, the ultimate mode of existence, the Buddha, our teacher, us, and everything else lack any kind of inherent, independent existence. There is no little guy inside of us running the show, separate from our body and mind. There is no Buddha inside the Buddha's body and mind that is running the show separate from his body and mind or aggregates. On this deeper level of existence, we are all empty of a solid personality.

We abide in that, and having removed the wrong conceptions of ourselves, we imagine ourselves appearing in the form of the future Buddha that we are going to become. We imagine ourselves as Shakyamuni Buddha with a body made of light. We have a ball of light in our heart and we radiate light out to all the sentient beings in all the different directions. We purify their negative karma. We purify all their suffering and problems. We give them realizations and we transform them into Buddhas. We transform the whole environment into a pure land. We sit and imagine all of the above.

After spending some time visualizing it, rejoicing and feeling happy, we say: "Well, This is only a visualization. What is it that is the real obstacle preventing me from becoming a Buddha? What is the obstacle preventing other sentient beings from becoming Buddhas?" It is this partial mind, this biased mind of attachment and anger.

From there we go into the Four Immeasurables. 'May sentient beings abide in equanimity.' I went through the longer version of the Four Immeasurables: 'How wonderful it would be if they abide in equanimity. May they abide in that way. I will cause them to abide in that way.' And then requesting inspiration and guidance from our spiritual masters and the Buddhas: 'Please inspire me to bring this about.' We contemplate the Four Immeasurables: Equanimity, love, compassion and joy. Having done that and having reinforced our altruism, we return to visualize the field of positive potential, either keeping the same visualization as that of the objects of refuge or transforming it into the visualization of the tree.

We visualize the field of positive potential that we can plant our virtuous seeds in, holy beings with whom we can generate the seven very good attitudes. We then offer the Seven Limb Prayer to this field of positive potential, generating the seven attitudes. We do prostrations to develop respect and diminish our pride, and that opens ourselves up to learning from the merit field. We make offerings to them to decrease our attachment and our miserliness, as well as to help ourselves to be happy at being generous and giving pleasure. We imagine the actual offerings we have made on our shrine and the

mentally transformed ones that we have imagined in the sky, offering all of them. Then we confess and reveal all our negative actions instead of hiding them away and covering them up. First we regret them. Then we restore the relationships by taking refuge in the holy beings and generating altruism. We make a determination not to do them again and we do a remedial action. All these four fit into the third branch of confession.

The fourth limb is to rejoice at the virtues of holy beings who have direct perception of emptiness. We also rejoice at the virtues of ordinary beings who do not have direct perception of emptiness. This counteracts jealousy. Then we ask the holy beings and our teachers to remain until cyclic existence ends, thus creating the cause for us to meet teachers constantly. We want to not just meet them, but also to receive teachings from them. Knowing that teachings are essential for our spiritual development, we request all the holy beings to give teachings.

We have created a lot of positive potential through these six limbs, and we dedicate it all to the enlightenment of all sentient beings. We don't keep the good karma for ourselves; we dedicate it for the welfare of others. In that way we protect it, and we steer it towards the goal we want. If we create virtue and we don't dedicate it, then when we get angry, it can get destroyed. If we don't dedicate it, then it might just ripen (let's say, in a happy rebirth) but it won't lead to ultimate enlightenment. It is important that we dedicate it for the highest goals.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] What does 'Om namo manjushriye namo sushriye namo uttama shriye soha' mean?

I don't know what all of it means. I have asked several of my teachers and I haven't found anybody who knows what all of it means. 'Namo' means to pay homage or to prostrate. '*Om namo manjushriye namo sushriye namo uttama shriye soha*' in general means homage to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. 'Manjushriye' is referring to Manjushri, the Buddha of wisdom. I don't know the rest of the terms. I have been trying to get a translation but I haven't been able to.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Oh no, you are not imagining a field. When you say 'field of positive potential', it doesn't mean a field like Earth. It is a field in the sense that you can cultivate your virtue in the field of the holy beings. In other words, by generating these seven attitudes, you cultivate virtue and the field is the assembly of holy beings. If you choose to visualize the tree, actually what happens is, you have a lake made of milk, out of which this tree grows. I don't know what brand of milk. Maybe it is non-fat milk these days. [Laughter]

[Audience: Inaudible]

There're different ways of dealing with the mental distortions that are coming up. One way that is commonly used in the Theravada tradition, is to just stand back and observe it. Label it 'thinking', 'thinking', 'anger', 'anger'. Just label it (not doing it in an angry way), detach yourself from it and observe it. That's one way because that way you are not giving it any energy. It is arising and it is going to discharge by itself.

Another way of dealing with it that is more prevalent in the Tibetan tradition, is that you do some of the thought training practices. For example, when anger is arising, you notice it is a distortion and you use one of the techniques in the thought training practices. Somebody stepped on your shoes, you look back at it and say: "This is my negative karma ripening." Or you say: "This is pushing my buttons. What button is it pushing?" You use some active method to deal with it. Buddha taught different ways because people are different, and also because at different times we need to do different things.

Let's sit quietly and digest.

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>