

**Preparatory Practice No. 5: Making a Mandala Offering** (lightly edited transcript)  
*by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 22 Jun 94*

**Contents (click on heading to view text)**

- Why We Do Preliminary Practices
- What Mandala Means
- Making Mandala Offerings

---

I want to explain to you the purpose of doing mandala offerings. It is important to understand why we perform the offering, otherwise it may seem like a nice ritual that we get into for ritual's sake. Or you get completely turned off because you cannot identify with the ritual. It is important to avoid these two extremes.

Preliminary practices are done before we do a meditation, especially higher level meditations, for the purpose of purification and accumulation of merit. Many of them involve physical activities – prostrations, mandala offerings, water bowl offerings, making tsa tsas (little images of the Buddha), Dorje Khadro fire puja where you are offering your negativities in the form of sesame seeds and burning them. There are several reasons for doing them.

---

**Why We Do Preliminary Practices**

We usually think, "Meditation is a spiritual practice. It doesn't involve any physical activity." We get this idea of the great Zen practitioner in the mountains who doesn't move. But here we are, doing these practices of the Tibetan tradition which involve so much physical activity. I think it is because we are physically oriented beings. We do have a body. We do work with form. We like to move and manipulate things. These activities help us to coordinate our meditation – the visualization, the feeling we are trying to generate when we're doing the practice – with the words that we're saying and the actions we're doing with our body. Our body, speech and mind are all working in sync. We don't exclude the body.

Also, generally, when we first start to practice, we have a lot of restless energy. You can see it when we sit down and meditate. Our body hurts and is restless. We want to get up and do something. The preliminary practices, many of which involve working with the body, help us to channel our restless physical energy and use it in a constructive way. It is a very skilful way to use that energy, rather than feel, "Oh gosh, I have this energy. Got to sit still and not move!" These practices are nice because you are doing some meditation and doing something useful, but your body is moving and it is relaxed.

The purpose of reciting the Seven Limb Prayer before teachings or meditation is for purification and creation of merit or positive potential. Purification and the creation of positive potential are extremely important in our practice. Here is a nice analogy. Our mind is like a field. Before you plant anything in the field, you have to clear away the garbage, the thorns, the stones, etc, and you have to add water and fertilizer to enrich the soil. And then you put the seeds in. Only then will the seeds grow. If you don't clear the field out and apply fertilizer, nothing will grow even if you plant lots of seeds.

The field is like our consciousness or mind. Listening to the teachings is analogous to planting the seeds. Before we can listen to the teachings, do meditation and make the crop of realizations grow, we need to clean our mind out and fertilize it. Purification is cleaning the mind of all the negative karmic obscurations, negative actions we've done in the past. We 'fertilize' the mind by doing positive actions and getting the good energy that comes from acting constructively.

The importance of purification and accumulation of merit can't be over emphasized. My teachers have always said this. Having done the practices over a number of years, I can see that what they said was right. When we first go into Dharma, we are often very idealistic. We want to do the high practices. We go and hear the teachings. We try to understand them but we don't. We fall asleep. We get stuck in our meditation. Or our mind gets very distracted and we can't concentrate. Or we get an incredible amount of garbage coming up in our meditation. You're supposed to be meditating on bliss and emptiness, but instead you're remembering that somebody beat you up in the playground when you were five years old. [laughter] The mind is just going bonkers!

All these obstacles arise due to the negative karma that we created from deeds done in the past, either earlier in this life or in previous lives, or both. We need to spend a lot of time clearing these out. We also need to enrich the mind with the good energy from acting constructively. If you do these, then even if you hear a little bit of teaching or do a little bit of meditation, some experience enters the heart.

People often ask, "How come you spend so much time doing prayers at the beginning [of teachings and meditation sessions]?" The prayers we do here before teachings or meditation are actually the shortened version of the shortened version of the Tibetan version. People are always asking, "How come you spend so many hours doing these preliminary practices – mandala offerings, prostrations, and so on?" The teachers would explain that it is for the very reason that we have just mentioned. They are done so that when we meditate or listen to teachings, they can penetrate our mind like a ground that is prepared for cultivation.

At times when we practice, we find that our mind doesn't feel fertile. The mind feels hard. Have you ever had this experience? You sit down to practice, but there's no energy to practice. You don't want to do anything except watch TV and eat chocolate ice-cream. There's no energy to practice, and even if you get yourself to the meditation cushion, you feel bored. You are distracted. You sit there and go over the outline of the meditation. But you feel that you're just reading words, somebody else's words. "Why am I doing this?" Much doubt comes into your mind, "I shouldn't be here. This doesn't work. Maybe I should do something else." The mind feels like a piece of concrete when you try to work with it. It is like a ground that's dried out with thorns and rocks in it.

This is why the preliminary practices are so important. They make the mind fertile. When you feel stuck in your practice, then you should place more emphasis on doing the preliminaries. Do lots of prostrations. Do lots of mandala offerings. It really begins to change your mind. This is why in the Tibetan system, they have the general practice of doing 100,000 prostrations, 100,000 mandala offerings and so on. This is a way of doing very intense purification and collection of positive potential in a period of time. They give you like a chunk of ground in your mind that is fertile, cleared of thorns and stones, and ready to be planted.

I don't know why they chose the number 100,000. One lama said this is so that you will have 100,000 chances to do one with sincerity. [laughter] The number itself is not so important as compared to the process of doing it repeatedly. When you sit down and do any of these practices repeatedly, it generates quite an experience in you. I am hoping that by going through and showing you how to do the mandala offering, some people will start doing many mandala offerings. If you want to keep count and work towards 100,000, that would be very good.

I taught the mandala offering when I lived in Singapore. We spent several weeks learning how to do it. After the course, the group met once a week to do mandala offerings together. They taught and helped each other as well as helped new-comers. It was very nice.

All the preliminaries work both ways – to purify the mind of negativities and to enrich the mind with positive potential. Making the mandala offering specifically purifies our miserliness, stinginess, attachment. The mind that wants to hold everything to ourselves. The mind that attaches to everything. "This is mine. I don't want to offer you a tissue because then I won't have it." "This is my water." "This is my house." "This is my car." "This is my partner." "This is my thought." "This is my idea." "This is my way of doing things." "This is my personal history." "This is my resume". "This is my occupation." We not only cling to material possessions, but we also cling to ideas, to identities, and even to our merit. We want to keep everything to ourselves. We're so afraid that if we give something, we won't have it. Then we'll be poor. We hold on to things. Our house is filled with stuff! Totally filled with stuff that we never use! The mind just wants to collect things. We feel empty inside. There's a spiritual hole inside, which we try to fill by collecting material things, titles, self-images, and ideas. But none of these works.

Doing the mandala offering is a way of clearing out all these negative states of mind. Here, 'mandala' means the universe and everything in it. Instead of looking at things and saying, "Oh that's good. I want it!" we train ourselves to think, "Oh, that looks good. I'm offering it to the Triple Gem." It's a total reversal. We are reversing the mind that wants to collect things for ourselves. We are developing the mind that takes joy in giving. When you do this practice, it will bring up all the things you are attached to, all the things you are stingy or miserly with. You sit down to do a session and when you offer the mandala or

the universe repeatedly, your mind is going, “Oh, I don’t want to offer my teddy-bear. I’ve had it since I was five years old. I can’t put it in the mandala. I will offer everything else, but not this.” You never think about your teddy-bear anyway, but when the time comes to give it, you don’t want to give. Or “I offer everything I have except the money in my bank account.” [laughter] Or we have an old jacket sitting in the basement. We will never wear it but still, we can’t give it away because we feel we might need it some time.

All these attachments and distractions come up. Attachment to material possessions will come up first, because normally, at the beginning level, offering the mandala is about offering material things. We’re offering the universe and all the beautiful objects in it. As you get more and more into the practice, we offer what is called the inner mandala. Here, we imagine our body transforming into material objects and the external universe. When you come to this level of practice, you start working with your attachment to your body. “This is my body. I won’t give it up!” “My toenails – I can’t give them up!” [laughter]

As you’re sitting there in the meditation session making offerings repeatedly, attachment to our ideas also comes up. Giving with a pure heart is a process of letting go, isn’t it? When we give an object to somebody, we completely let go of any kind of identification with the object. But the mind clings to everything. “It’s mine. It’s mine. I can’t give that up.” Our attachment comes up, including attachment to our ideas and attachment to our image. You start seeing all sorts of things you’ve held on to from the past, “I don’t want to let go of these things. I don’t want to give them up.” And yet you’re doing this practice where you’re building something up physically and then offering it. Physically, you’re going through this motion of giving repeatedly.

Gradually, something starts to jar the concrete in the mind to say, “Wait a minute. Where is the mind that is giving?” “How come my mind doesn’t want to give?” “Look at all my ideas that I don’t want to let go of. Look at all my identities I don’t want to let go of. Look at all my opinions I don’t want to let go of. Look at my possessions, my body and all the other things that I don’t want to let go of.” If you do this practice in a concentrated way, it will touch these areas psychologically within us. It helps us to look at these issues and work them out. Instead of keeping them swept under the rug and allowing them to get stinky and causing you to trip over the protruding rug all the time, it’s helping us get this smelly stuff out, thus making the rug flat and the room beautiful. It is extremely valuable in this way.

Doing the mandala offering purifies the attachment, the stinginess, the miserliness, the clinging mind. It enriches the mind with the positive potential from giving. We create a lot of positive potential or merit just by giving. Every time we give people things, it puts a good imprint on our mind. You can see that in daily life. When you have something and you give it from the heart to somebody else, you feel very good. When you give without attachment and you just want the other person to be happy, your mind feels totally blissed out! The mandala offering is training us to develop the mind that takes delight and joy in making other people happy. In doing so, we create merit or positive potential which is like the fertilizer in our mind.

While preparing for this session, I was thinking, “How am I going to describe to you what merit is? Merit is good karma, but how do I explain good karma?” Merit is not physical. It is not points that are awarded to you. As you practice, as you purify, as you build up positive potential, you can see a change in yourself. When you were just starting to practice, you felt shaky and insecure and wobbly. But as you practice, you get to a point in your practice where you feel there’s some kind of basis, some kind of richness in your mind, even if not everything is completely all right and secure. You have something to fall back on. Spiritually, you’re not completely lost like you were before. As you practice, you begin to get this sense of richness in your mind. The practice of offering the mandala specifically cultivates this – repeatedly giving and building up that richness. It creates positive potential. It builds up the qualities in the mind of taking delight in being generous and the ability to give with a pure mind, without going through all the ‘trips’.

Sometimes before we give, our mind goes through incredible trips! Watch your mind. I should teach this just before Christmas. “Oh, I’m going to get this. Are they going to like it? If they don’t like it, then maybe they won’t like me.” “If I give something too expensive, they’re going to think I’m rich and they’re going to start expecting things from me. But if I don’t give something nice enough, they’re going to think I’m a cheapskate. What is the right amount to spend on the gift so that they won’t expect anything more from me or think I’m a cheapskate?” “I got to give them something they like, but I don’t want them to like it too much, because then they might get attached to me.” “I want them to like me a lot. I want them to be

attached to me.” “What if it’s the wrong size?” “What happens if they don’t get me something and they feel embarrassed?” “How much did they spend last year when they bought me the present? Am I giving in accord with that?” Our mind just goes bananas! Just watch it when we try and select gifts for somebody. There’s no delight in giving with that kind of mind. The mind is totally contorted! We’re so worried about the object and the situation that there’s no delight. There’s no love in it.

Doing the mandala offering helps us to clear up all the negativities that keep us from giving. I believe you have the experience where you were with someone and you just gave something you had to that person. You didn’t know why you did that. You didn’t think about it before. The gift might even be something you really liked. But you just felt, “Well, I just want this person to have it,” and you gave it like that. And you felt so good afterwards. If only we can make every instance of giving an experience like this, where we just feel, “Wow, this is nice to do”.

Doing the mandala offering helps us to accumulate merit, which is like the fertilizer for the field of our consciousness. It makes the mind rich. It enables the mind to absorb the meaning of the teachings when we hear them so that we’re not just hearing words and concepts. We’re getting the meaning. Again, you can see this as you practice. When you first start practicing, you’re struggling with the words. Then you kind of get the concepts. Sometimes you think you have understood something but a few years later, you realized you had never understood it. Why was that? This is because at the beginning, the mind was still hard. It didn’t have enough merit or positive potential. As time went on and you accumulate positive potential, the meaning of the teachings got integrated in your mind and you were able to understand it at a deeper level. As you grow in your practice over time, you will see how this happens. You can begin to understand from your own experience how collecting positive potential works and why it is so important to do it.

Making mandala offerings is especially helpful when your mind gets stuck and feels like concrete. When you do the practice, there will be times when your mind feels very happy to do it, visualizing all the beautiful things and offering them to the Buddha. At other times, all your negative attitudes about giving will come up. This is the purpose of the practice. Whenever you’re doing a practice and the negative attitudes come up, don’t think that you’re doing it wrong. When we practice and all of our mental garbage comes up, we tend to think, “Oh, oh, I’m doing it wrong. I’m a failure. My practice is a mess!” Actually, when you’re purifying or collecting positive potential like this, it’s going to bring up all your personal issues. If it doesn’t, then you’re not doing it right. [laughter] Why? Because you can’t know something beautiful unless you clean the garbage first. When your garbage comes up in the practice, have this feeling of, “I’m really glad this is coming up, because now I can look at it. Now I can work with it. Now I can clean it up.”

## What Mandala Means

Like I said, we’re offering the whole universe when we offer the mandala. The Tibetan word for ‘mandala’ is ‘kyil kor’. Its literal meaning is ‘taking the essence’. We’re offering the universe to the field of positive potential: to Lama Tsong Khapa, to Buddha, the lineage lamas, the deities, the bodhisattvas, the arhats, the dakas and dakinis, the protectors. We’re offering it to all the holy beings. By doing that, we’re like taking the essence from our relationship with them and creating a lot of positive potential, truly making use of our relationship with them. We offer to them because they’re considered the highest objects of offering. You may ask, “How come the Buddha is the highest object of offering? First of all, the Buddha is a monk. He’s supposed to have renounced everything. How come I need to offer him the universe? How come I’m offering him gold, silver and other beautiful things? He’s a monk! This isn’t appropriate!” [laughter]

That isn’t the way to think. The idea here is when we’re offering to the Buddha, we’re thinking of all the qualities of an enlightened being. Under the topic “Refuge” in the *lamrim*, we talked about the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. You think of their compassion, their wisdom, and their skills. When you think of all the subjects for meditation in the *lamrim* and recognize Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as having those realizations, then there is a real sense of appreciation, love and respect for them. It’s because of their qualities that they become the highest objects of offering. We respect those qualities. We want to emulate them. Buddha, Dharma and Sangha become our role model. In that way they are called the field of positive potential. They are the highest objects that we can offer to because of their qualities. Also, when we respect their qualities, we’re opening our mind to develop those same qualities

in ourselves. That's why recognizing other people's qualities, making offerings and prostrations are so important.

## Making Mandala Offerings

You may imagine just a single image of the Buddha to represent the merit field that we are offering the mandala to. See the Buddha as the essence of all the holy beings: your teachers, the lineage lamas, deities, Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats, dakas and dakinis, protectors. See the Buddha as the embodiment of all of them. Alternatively, you can visualize the whole field of merit with Lama Tsong Khapa in the center. At his heart is the Buddha. At Buddha's heart is Vajradhara, which is the aspect that the Buddha appeared in when he gave the tantric teachings. Above are all the lineage lamas, and on the rows below, you have the four rows of tantric deities, then a row each of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats, dakas and dakinis and the protectors. That's the expanded visualization.

The whole idea is to remember that all the holy beings are of the same essence. They have different physical forms but they have the same essence. What is that essence? It's the mind of compassion and the mind of what we call 'wisdom of bliss and emptiness'. They all have the same essence but appear in different physical forms in order to communicate with us, because we relate to physical form. That's why you can either visualize the Buddha as the embodiment of all of the holy beings, or you can do the expanded visualization and see all of them separately. But remember that they are all of the same nature. If you do tantric practice, then think of them as having the same nature of mind as your teacher.

When we make the mandala offering, we are offering something physical with our mandala plate and the base. We're chanting the prayer which is like a verbal offering. In our mind, we're visualizing all the different things that we're saying out loud and imagining each thing in a very beautiful way and offering them. It has been emphasized that we should try to have a clear visualization when we're making the offering. The reason why they emphasize this is because if your visualization is clear, then you tend to have a deeper feeling. But personally, I have found that sometimes we can get stuck in the visualization and start seeing the visualization as a technical skill, "Okay, here's the golden ground. Here's Mt. Meru. Here are the jewels. Here's this. Here's that." It is as if we are painting a picture but there's no feeling involved. We are looking at visualization as a technical skill to be developed. What I think is more important is to get the feeling of there being beautiful, valuable things that you're really giving. And to generate again and again the feeling of giving and how nice it is to give. Concentrate on that. Use the visualization in a way that helps you to generate that feeling of wholesome intention.

---

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>