

## GETTING STARTED

Now that we've received instruction on meditation, it is up to us to get started with a regular routine. So in this chapter I will offer simple, straightforward advice on how to begin a regular practice of meditation. Sounds simple, right? But how many really do it? How many people really maintain a daily practice? Not that many.

I read an analysis of meditation instruction once. The author had compiled statistics on the percentage of students still practicing after a certain period of time. The figures were abysmally low, and he commented that no other field of instruction would find such a failure rate acceptable. Actually, I don't find it acceptable either. Many of my students tell me that although they started years ago, they were never able to maintain a consistent practice, so they eventually gave it up. Coming to my class was a new beginning for them – I can only hope they will continue.

I try to teach, and now I'm trying to write this book, in a way that warns students of the most common mistakes they might make and prepares them for as many of the difficulties, obstacles, and misunderstandings that can hinder or derail their practice. At times it will seem rather gloomy as I go through one thing after another that can go wrong, but I feel that the most useful thing I have to give my students and readers is the lessons I've learned from my own mistakes. If you can learn from these, your path may be smoother and more delightful. I hope the advice in this and subsequent chapters will help you avoid the pitfalls that have caught so many of us. I have included some advice that is specific to Vajrayana practitioners, but most of what is contained herein will be of use to anyone who is learning to meditate.

First, find a time to meditate. Morning or night, both have their adherents. Traditional texts generally recommend morning, although many of us are "night people." You should choose the time when your mind is most naturally clear and calm, your body fresh and rested, your environment relatively peaceful and quiet, and you're least likely to be disturbed. Don't be afraid to be creative just recommended to a student that he meditate during his work lunch hour.

Select a period of time for your meditation. Fifteen or twenty minutes is probably best for beginners. If you've read many books or heard many stories, you'll realize that the great practitioners of the past were extremely diligent and you might be tempted to emulate their example: "I'm going to sit in the full lotus position for three hours. Whatever happens, I'm not moving!" Forget it; that isn't going to work. No matter how strong, tough, inspired, or disciplined you feel you are, you'll quit. It'll just be too much for you. You won't necessarily say to yourself or your friends, "Gee, this is a little too much for me." You will probably just find yourself getting interested in something else.

I would observe the following so often in the East that I became sadly cynical about it: A newcomer would meet a high lama, receive some teaching, and then go gung-ho into retreat, frequently into some famous cave, full of inspiration and vowing never to quit. Without fail, after a while he would return to town, usually with some excuse, saying that he was now ready to practice tantra (meaning he wanted sex).

So think of meditation like a physical exercise. You wouldn't start off jogging three hours a day, would you? Follow the same common sense. Start slow, gradually increase, and build yourself up. Develop meditation muscles. With time you'll be able to sit for longer and longer periods. The problem is both physical and mental. If you force your body too much, it will simply be too painful – you'll spend your entire session coping with the pain. If you force your mind too much, either you'll feel burnt out or you'll find you've been daydreaming for the last fifteen minutes of your meditation session.

When I was first taught meditation, the instruction was that your meditation session should be like visiting a friend. When you visit, you have your cup of tea and you chat. If you're skilful, you'll end the conversation before you run out of things to say and feel awkward. If the meeting ends on an unpleasant note, you might feel reluctant to see your friend again. It is the same with practice – end your session before it becomes unpleasant. If you don't, you won't look forward to practicing again. Although meditation can often be difficult and challenging, view your session as a special time in your day, a time you look forward to with joy and anticipation. If you do this, your ability to meditate for longer and longer periods will develop naturally.

One way I've developed for monitoring my duration and exertion has been to ask myself, "Can I meditate like this every day for the rest of my life?" If I

have doubts about answering “yes,” then I know I am probably pushing myself too hard.

The next major consideration is place. Many people like to meditate in groups and that is fine. I know it is common for Zen practitioners to go to their center to meditate before work. I certainly admire that kind of diligence. For now, I’ll assume that you’ll want to establish a daily practice in your own home.

If you’re lucky, you might have an extra room to set aside for meditation. That’s great. If that’s not possible, select a room that’s already in use. Most people select their bedroom. Since we usually meditate either right before or right after sleep, it’s a sensible choice. Also, since it’s the room you’ve selected for sleeping, it’s probably the quietest room in your house. Whichever room it is, it should be quiet, airy, and free of smoke.

If you really want to do things right, you can orient your house, room, shrine, or seat according to the traditional Chinese rules of geomancy, or feng-shui. You can consult books or find an expert. There are many, many rules, and some of the lamas, especially H. E. Tai Situ Rinpoche, place a lot of credence in them. His Eminence is the overseer of the Samye Ling Tibetan Center in Scotland where I did my four-year retreat. He made sure that both the building and individual rooms conformed to feng-shui. Doors were bricked-up and new ones built. A pond was dug. Shrines and meditation cushions were moved about.

One rule of feng-shui that I always try to follow is not to place my shrine in the direct line between my bedroom door and window. I try to put it in the last place I see when I open my bedroom door from the corridor.

Many people like to meditate with a view, perhaps looking out a large picture window. This sense of space can be very expansive and is especially appropriate for certain kinds of practices or to counteract certain hindrances (such as dullness or sleepiness) in your practice. Others will find this distracting and will prefer to sit facing a shrine or a wall. Of course, many people meditate with their eyes closed so that none of this matters too much. Lamas generally recommend meditating with the eyes open: however, my teacher says that for beginning practices it’s acceptable to close the eyes. I personally find meditating facing my shrine too hectic, too overwhelming. But orientation is up to you.

Some people like to meditate on a special mat on the floor; others just sit up in bed. I've always meditated in bed: it's never seemed like a problem.

Traditionally, of course, people generally didn't have enough room to meditate any place other than where they sleep. On the other hand, we can argue that the area normally associated with sleep and sex may not be the most conducive to meditative equilibrium.

I think you'll find that if you meditate in the same place every day, your seat will build up a very special feeling, some sense of power or positive energy. I usually don't notice it until I've been away for a while: when I return, my seat almost seems as if it were humming.

I strongly recommend having a shrine where you practice. If you're a Vajrayana practitioner, a shrine is a necessity; instructions for its layout are contained in the commentaries on your practice. A shrine creates a sacred space in your room – it uplifts you and reminds you of the spiritual dimension of life. It also becomes both a repository and generator of positive energy that will benefit your practice.

If you don't have the space for a separate piece of furniture, you can use the top of a bureau or chest of drawers. If you're doing a specific practice, the instructions will specify the shrine layout, but for now I'll give you the bare minimum. It's always nice to have the seven water bowls for offering. Traditionally, they should be made of the most expensive metal one can afford, but I've come to prefer the porcelain of Chinese teacups. You can also offer candles, incense, or flowers if you like. Next, place photos of the teachers to whom you feel closest. They will keep you inspired and motivated. And it's nice to have one nice image, either a *thankha* (Tibetan scrolled painting with embroidery) or statue of a buddha or deity, to remind you of your goal and to be a central focus for your practice.

The image should be clean and shiny; don't buy an old, worn-looking *thankha* or a dark, sooty statue. They might look like antiques, but they're not appropriate shrine objects. Our buddha-nature is not worn and sooty. Also, make sure it's a useful image for you. Is it a deity for a practice you've never heard of and probably will never do, or is it something more generic, like Shakyamuni Buddha, that will always be appropriate? The image must be iconographically correct or it cannot be blessed. If you're not sure, have it

checked by a lama before you buy it. Finally, have it blessed by a teacher you respect.

You might also want to buy a rosary, or mala. There are many kinds, but except for small prostration malas, they should all have 108 beads. The best are bodhi seed beads, which are made from the same species of tree under which Lord Buddha attained enlightenment, or lotus seeds, which generally come from China. Different practices might recommend different types of beads, but one of these two will probably suffice for quite a while. You'll also eventually want to pick up a vajra (Tib. dorje) and bell. They should be bought together as a matching set. Other ritual objects can wait.

Now that we've discussed the time and place, let's talk about you, especially your body. Try to stay healthy. If you're not, try to get healthy. It's best to rely on more natural methods of healing if possible. Stop taking recreational drugs, especially anything that can be smoked – they're the worst. They block the subtle energy channels in a particularly pernicious manner.

Learn an appropriate posture. It's never easy for anybody and you'll have to put up with a wee bit of pain. But as I mentioned earlier, don't push yourself too much either. If sitting cross-legged on the floor is too difficult for you, use a chair. If possible, it is best not to lean against anything. Mantak Chia, a Taoist teacher in America, recommends sitting on a chair in preference to sitting cross-legged. So don't feel shy or inadequate. Sitting on a chair has become more acceptable as the baby-boomers age; temples and classrooms often have chairs now for those who can't sit cross-legged. Of the cross-legged positions, the full lotus position is preferred and in some advanced practices is mandatory. At least try. Other leg positions are acceptable. The most important factors are: You are able to sit comfortably for the duration of your session, the straightness of your back promotes mental clarity, your chest doesn't feel contracted, and you are able to breathe abdominally without feeling constricted. For the last, one needs loose clothing and a positioning of the legs that can be maintained without abdominal tension. For instance, the normal position Americans use when they sit on the floor, with their legs crossed in front of them and their knees slightly elevated, doesn't work well because it tenses the abdomen. Also, I've found that if people sit toward the front edge of their cushions, this tilts the sacral region forward and nicely aligns the spine and the rest of the body. If these postural factors are met, the energy flow in your body will aid the development of meditational experiences.

Many people seem to like these little kneeling benches. They are gaining in popularity these days, especially among those who have some physical problem prohibiting the cross-legged postures. I like them myself and really appreciate how positively they effect both my posture and my breathing.

Another consideration is whether to practice alone or with other family members. Once again, this is a matter of personal preference. I have almost always practiced alone and am very idiosyncratic, but I feel it would be both supportive and bonding to practice as a family. Practicing with another person can be a very healing experience. If it's someone with whom you already feel close, it will make you feel closer; if it's someone with whom you're having difficulties, it will help to ease those problems. It's hard to remain angry at someone with whom you've just meditated.

Having discussed the outer circumstances or conditions necessary or at least helpful to begin practicing, what then are the inner qualities necessary or useful for the practitioner? First is intelligence. Intelligence doesn't necessarily mean being brilliant or scholarly. In fact, overly intellectual people often have difficulty meditating. Intelligence means listening to the instructions, clarifying doubts and misunderstandings, and applying the instructions correctly. One must investigate one's own state of being and figure out how the teachings apply. Are you using the techniques correctly? Are you noticing your faults?

So many people I know never seem to resolve their doubts about the technique they are using, and so they settle for a very flawed meditation even when conferring with a teacher, even someone like me, could really be of benefit. I have had this experience often since I began teaching – someone will finally reveal a problem with a practice that he thinks is unworkable or is due to some flaw in himself. I will be able to offer a relatively simple and straightforward solution based on my own experience that very easily eliminates the obstacle. It's not that I'm a great or clairvoyant teacher – it's just that the error is so obvious.

A practitioner also needs faith or trust. In this case, I don't mean an emotional feeling toward the teacher or the Buddha. I mean confidence that the instructions will really do what they're supposed to do. It's like the trust a parachutist has in his parachute – he must have no doubt at all that it's going to open. If we don't have the same trust, we also won't be able to jump into the practice – we'll always be hesitating and hedging our bets. To stand too much

outside the meditation watching yourself meditating is a big problem. It impedes our progress with our meditation. Too much of our energy is in the watching, which leaves little remaining energy for accomplishing the meditation.

Guru Rinpoche said that we should meditate in the same way that a sparrow enters a nest. A sparrow spends some time investigating whether or not it is safe to enter. Once his examination is over, he then enters unhesitatingly. That's a wonderful metaphor for practice. First clear up all your doubts about your technique, then throw yourself into the technique with no separation or self-consciousness. Of course, it's easy to say, but that is the direction toward which we should be moving.

Another necessary quality is determination. It's easy to gear oneself up for counting mantras or prostrations. For some, physical discipline is also easy. But the determination of the meditator is different. We must be determined to strive to purify our obscurations until they're completely gone – in other words, until our buddha-nature unobstructedly shines through. When we sit, we decide to do our best not to be swayed by our negativities. We should cultivate this attitude at the beginning of our session. Otherwise, no matter how much we practice, we will day-dream a lot and our meditation will always be wishy-washy. I know this from experience – I may do my session of meditation, but it is tepid. Why? I don't have that inner strength to remain unmoved by the arising of the various mental contents.

We also need some renunciation. We may not be able to live in caves or become monks or nuns, but we have to be able to start saying “no” to the distractions of our life. Otherwise, we'll never get any practice done. There'll always be something more interesting to do. We have to understand the impermanence and meaninglessness of most of what takes up our free time. In a later chapter, I'll talk more about the “four thoughts,” contemplations to increase renunciation. For now it is enough to understand that some weariness with ordinary life and a willingness to give up a few meaningless things is necessary. Before we began practicing, the day had twenty-four hours and every minute was filled by some activity or another, whether working, sleeping, or watching TV. Lord Buddha does not have the power to add extra hours to the day; the only way to get any practice done is to stop doing something else.

Finally, we need an ability to face pain and hardship, to tolerate a little difficulty in pursuit of the ultimate truth. There will always be difficulties on the path. It's very important to understand that, in general, your progress will be directly proportional to your willingness to endure these hardships. There's the hardship of giving up meaningless but fun activities, the hardship of separating and alienating oneself from family, friends, and community, the hardship of the difficulty of practice, and most importantly, the hardship of actually facing one's pain and negativities and dealing with them directly. Deeper, there is the hardship of giving up the ego. This can often feel like one is dissolving or even dying; experiencing this dissolution can be very threatening at first.

The point here is this: The benefits of practicing the Dharma are innumerable and amazing. But for any one of them to be accomplished, we have to give something up. If we want to be disciplined, we have to give up other activities. If we want solitude, we have to give up a little of our social life. On a deeper level, if we want calmness, we must abandon discursiveness; if we want to be compassionate, we must abandon aversion toward others. It's not going to happen that first you develop compassion and then that gives you the inspiration to give up your negativity. We must always take the first step, but once that first step is taken there is always some reward, some benefit. And that will encourage us to take that next little step.

A few words on meditation itself. Although there are innumerable techniques, especially within the Tibetan tradition, we can make a few general remarks for beginners. Whatever meditation you are doing, it will always be experienced in the following way: We are focusing on the object, we get distracted, we notice our distraction, and we return to our object. What changes with time is the length and subtlety of these distractions. This process is unavoidable and there are generally no shortcuts for making it easier. If you go to all the highest lamas and learn all the most profound techniques, none of them will tell how to recognize distractions sooner. You simply have to practice until it slowly improves.

That we all have some expectations of what we expect from our meditation makes it more difficult. When we find we are not doing much more than simply churning our thoughts, we can easily become discouraged or self-condemning. Don't. No matter how bad your meditation might seem, it's the effort that counts. Returning to your meditation time and time again will have gradual but very deep benefits that a beginner can hardly imagine. And self-condemnation,



feeling that we're the worst meditator on the block and will never get it, is simply indulging in more thoughts.

The experience of cascading thoughts doesn't get the credit it's due – it's actually a fantastic experience that we must acknowledge, respect, and appreciate. From beginningless time all sentient beings have been completely identified with their thoughts. When they think, "I want a hamburger," for example, they really believe they want a hamburger. When we meditate, we progress from feeling we want a hamburger to knowing we had a thought about wanting a hamburger. Very, very different. I often call it a major step in evolution. The person who is aware of thoughts is a very different being from the one who isn't thus aware. The meditator who is experiencing never-ending discursiveness has made a significant breakthrough in development. One is definitely beginning the process of freeing oneself from the power of one's thoughts and their inherent negativity.

Longchenpa summarizes the qualities of the successful student:

*... the person who is going to experience for himself life's meaning  
Must be one who has confidence, perseverance, and the desire to escape  
from his present situation and the feeling of disgust with it.  
Wearied of Samsara, he must deeply concern himself with liberation,  
Dismissing this life from his mind and looking to enlightenment  
henceforward,  
Keeping excitement and distraction far away and having few emotions,  
Being contented, leisurely, having visionary experiences, and being full  
of dedication,  
Having a firm mind and a deep sense of reverence,  
Such a person will realize most excellent liberation.*

Now you're ready to go. Please remember that it isn't possible to get everything right. Don't give up or procrastinate if your room is too noisy or you can't sit in a perfect position just yet. Not practicing is your loss. There is always some difficulty in practicing the Dharma; we'd all be buddhas by now if there weren't. If we put up with difficulties to accomplish the most mundane or trivial of things, how much more important is it to do so to accomplish enlightenment! So, if possible, perfect your conditions, but until then, don't procrastinate.

Bruce Newman. *A Beginners Guide to Tibetan Buddhism* Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2004.  
pages 61-70

## MEDITATION

As he explains how to rely on a spiritual teacher, Tsong-kha-pa (1: 94-99) lays out what to do during a session of formal meditation practice, presenting the six preparatory practices and the seven branches of worship. He then explains (1: 100-108) how to behave in between periods of meditation. It is important to have a balanced diet and to use even sleep as a time to strengthen your practice. You should guard the gates of your senses and live with mindfulness, with care. The point is that the actual formal sitting sessions and the periods in between sessions should be complementary, each enhancing the quality of the other. Learn to use twenty-four hours every day to foster virtue through one means or another.

Nobody wakes up early in the morning thinking, “Today I really should have more trouble. I ought to have more conflicts and anger.” Instead we think, “Today I hope for a very peaceful day, a free and happy day.” Nonetheless, we see many problems. On this planet with six billion human beings, no one wants trouble. But there is still plenty of trouble—most of it caused by us, by human beings. This seems very clear. We really do want what is good, but our minds are completely dominated by afflictions. These mental afflictions are based upon ignorance at many levels, including the ultimate ignorance and coarser levels of ignorance. These ignorant, deluded minds simply do not know reality. Deluded minds look at things from just one angle and decide, “Oh, this is bad,” or “This is good.”

Meditation means learning to control our minds, thereby protecting our minds from domination by delusion and other afflictions. We may think, “Oh, I wish my mind were not dominated by ignorance and other afflictions.” But these afflictions are very powerful and very destructive; they operate despite our wishes. We have to work to develop effective countermeasures. We cannot buy such remedies from a store; even very sophisticated machines cannot produce them for us. They are obtained only through mental effort, training the mind in meditation. Meditation means making our minds familiar with these countervailing forces, becoming habituated to them day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year. Even lifetime after lifetime, the effort still continues. Gradually, these countervailing forces become stronger and, as they do, the afflictions automatically recede because they are incompatible with these new mental states. The two are contradictory in the sense that they cannot exist together.

The Tibetan equivalent of the term “meditation” is gomba (sgom pa). It is bhavana in Sanskrit, which suggests deliberate cultivation and familiarization. Generally the Tibetan verb 'gom pa means “habituation” or “becoming familiar,” but as sgom pa it is an active verb, indicating an agent who deliberately carries out a particular type of familiarization.

The course of our actions is dictated by our minds and our minds in turn are dominated by and dictated to by afflictions. On this account, even though we wish for happiness, we end up with suffering. We are very familiar with and habituated to undisciplined mental states. Engrained over many lifetimes, such mental states seem spontaneous and natural. When we meditate so as to develop antidotes, we are going against the grain. We are learning new skills, a new way of thinking, a new way of being. So at first these antidotes are very weak, but over time they become stronger and, as they do, the afflictions become weaker.

Afflictions are tremendously diverse and incredibly opportunistic. Whenever there is an opening, they find one way or another to manifest. So it is important to understand them and to recognize them, to know how they appear in our minds. For example, we tend to regard attachment as a friend. It is a quality of our mind that tends to pull others towards us, so it helps us bring together conditions that we deem helpful for our survival. Anger and hatred are mental states that arise in relation to an obstacle; we tend to feel that they are there to protect us against things we don't want. We regard them as trusted friends, safeguarding us.

Responding to the diversity and ingenuity of the afflictions, we need powerful and diverse antidotes. The Buddha taught eighty-four thousand heaps of teachings; the literature explaining these teachings includes huge numbers of extensive treatises. There is a single, ultimate aim behind all of these teachings—to help us to find peace of mind. But we need a vast array of teachings and practices because the afflictions that disturb us are so diverse. Also, they manifest differently in different individuals. If we examine the afflictions themselves, how they function in our minds, and the internal and external conditions that give rise to them, then we are better prepared to develop antidotes. It is not enough to recognize the destructiveness of the afflictions and then make a wish for them to go away. We have to be very deliberate in cultivating their antidotes.

We develop antidotes to the afflictions through a series of levels: (1) wisdom derived from study, (2) wisdom derived from reflection, and (3) wisdom derived from meditation. Wisdom derived from study comes from listening to a teacher or studying a text. In these ways you can develop an intellectual understanding of the characteristics of the afflictions and the appropriate antidotes for each. On the basis of this intellectual understanding, you must then reflect critically and repeatedly, deepening your understanding until you have a genuine sense of conviction about the efficacy of the antidotes.

Up through this second level, your meditation is primarily analytic. As you engage in critical reflection and meditative analysis, you have to use reasoning based on four principles, these being the four avenues by which we engage with reality. These are (a) the principle of nature, (b) the principle of dependence, (c) the principle of function, and—on the basis of these first three principles—(d) the principle of evidence. For example, investigating the mind in terms of the principle of nature, we find that it is characterized by being clear and knowing. Again, in terms of the principle of nature, we find that all mental states change moment by moment. They are transient, evanescent. Also within the mind, we see the operation of incompatible contradictories. For example, we know that hatred and anger towards someone are contradictory to loving-kindness and compassion towards that person. These opposing forces contradict one another so that we cannot have both feelings at the same time. They are like heat and cold, opposing each other so as to preclude coexistence. This idea of incompatible contradictories is again part of the principle of nature.

When, based on analysis of nature, you then analyze cause-and-effect relationships, this is the principle of dependence. Recognizing these causal relations, you can come to understand the specific functions of different mental states. That each thing—in this case, each mental state—has its own distinctive function is the principle of function. Then, understanding these three principles, you can use logical evidence. Given that such and such is the case, something else must logically follow.

Using these four principles in analysis, you can bring to bear the correct antidotes against each affliction as it arises in your mind. Based on this sort of analytic meditation, you can then move to the third level—wisdom derived from meditation. Here your meditation becomes more in the nature of absorption, with less analysis. The primary approach is to maintain a single-pointed placement of the mind upon a fact that you have determined in

analysis. Through meditating on this fact with single-pointed attention, this fact becomes ever more evident, until you have attained wisdom deriving from meditative practice. These are the steps through which we transform our minds.

### **QUESTIONS FOR THE DALAI LAMA**

**Question:** Your Holiness, as a beginner on the path, still taking just baby steps, do you have any words to help me establish a meaningful daily practice that will lead me forward to greater awareness and understanding?

**Answer:** Read more. There are translations of Buddhist texts into English, as well as French, German, Spanish, and of course Chinese—although, I think there are fewer translations into Chinese than into English. There are many new translations into English. Read such texts daily for an hour or at least a half hour. Then turn your mind inward and contemplate what you have learned. Examine and investigate, comparing what the text says with your usual way of thinking and living. It is best to do this in the morning, when your mind is fresh. Maybe after breakfast is even better; at least for me it is like that. Before breakfast, I am hungry. Sometimes when I meditate, half of my mind goes to my stomach!

Take this approach. Study, and then take what you have understood as the basis for your contemplation, spending some time each morning in formal meditation. Combine understanding of what you have studied with meditative practice. This approach brings together learning, critical reflection, and meditation.

The Dalai Lama. *From Here To Enlightenment*. Boston: Snow Lion Publications, 2012. pages 68-73

## USING THIS LIFE INTELLIGENTLY

As we have seen, Buddhist doctrines and practices call for analytical reflection. Fortunately, as humans we have a tremendous capacity for thought. Assisted by powerful analysis, we can generate altruism that is immeasurable in scope. In order to develop an altruistic intention to become enlightened we must first identify enlightenment itself. We do this by understanding that the minds of all sentient beings are empty of inherent existence, which leads to an awareness that the very concept of inherent existence itself is mistaken. The basic nature of sentient beings is the capacity for enlightenment, which we call Buddha-nature.

To understand that all sentient beings possess the foundation for becoming enlightened, you need analytical wisdom. First you need to understand that all of your problems stem from your mind's mistaken view of yourself, of other people, and of all things as existing in and of themselves. When you see that this is a mistake, you realize that you can become enlightened, after which you can extend this realization to all sentient beings; they too can become enlightened. This lays the groundwork for developing the desire to help everyone toward enlightenment.

Without analytical wisdom, altruism cannot be achieved. Without it, you are caught in the sway of continuous distraction. With it, you can engender a strong aspiration to help others by achieving your own enlightenment. With it, you can realize that phenomena seem to exist solidly in and of themselves but do not. This is why great Buddhist adepts over the ages have emphasized that the human life we have already attained is so meaningful.

With wisdom we can attain high spiritual development. When you consider that on this basis beings such as Nagarjuna attained great progress, you will see that there is no reason why you cannot attain the same. This encouragement is crucial.

## Contemplation

Consider:

1. Presently you have a very fortunate situation, for you are free from obstacles to religious practice, and you possess many favorable attributes that enable you to achieve high spiritual development.
2. This situation is rare.
3. Attaining such a situation in the next lifetime requires fundamentally moral behavior, practicing generosity and so forth, and aiming their effects toward being reborn in a well-endowed human lifetime.
4. The bad effects of a nonvirtuous action can be mitigated in four ways: by disclosing it, by regretting having done it, by intending not to do it in the future, and by engaging in virtuous actions such as public service.
5. Virtuous deeds should be performed by preparing a good motivation in advance, with high-quality execution, and by dedicating its force to altruistic enlightenment at its conclusion, without regrets.
6. It is important to develop a distaste for destructive emotions.
7. Think to yourself: Day and night I will make good use of this body of mine, which is a home of illness and the basis for the sufferings of old age, and lacks a core like a bubble.

The Dalai Lama. *Becoming Enlightened*. London: Rider Books, 2009. pages 59-60



## THE PRACTICE OF MEDITATION

HEARING, AGREEING with, and having devotion to Dharma will not benefit anyone unless the Dharma is actually applied in meditation. Otherwise we are like a physician who dies of sickness or a treasurer who spends his time counting money and dies in poverty.

Meditation practice in the Buddhist tradition is about “changing your mind,” which means transcendence of mind. When the ordinary mind goes from a state of ignorance to awareness, absolute truth can arise unimpeded by the sense perceptions. This is the intention of meditation practice.

There are two types of meditation: shamatha and vipashyana. The ground of shamatha is a peaceful state free from concepts. When we shift into distractions, shamatha provides a reference that supports and strengthens the ground of awareness and brings the mind back. Focusing the undistracted mind one-pointedly permits a genuine understanding of the true nature of whatever arises. This wisdom of discernment is vipashyana meditation, which analyzes and recognizes the true nature of all inner and outer phenomena.

In the beginning, it's difficult to recognize and develop awareness because of constant distractions. Our mind and body must be trained. Because of the physical, gross body, we're continually distracted by and grasping at grossness. The body is the container of meditation and must be tamed and trained to remain still. Within stillness we can recognize the difference between useful and useless movement—and realize our potential for resting in awareness.

The meditation posture trains both the body and mind—both of which are inherently empty in nature. Body and mind are joined by the breath, or wind element, which is called prana energy. Wind energy is the closest thing to space. Since the space quality of mind and body is the same, we can understand the truth of the slogan “Training the wind energy trains the mind.” The body is trained through the wind energy, and wind energy is trained through shamatha.

The traditional meditation posture is known as the seven-point posture of Vairochana. This posture disciplines the body so the flow of prana is more subtle and clear and less impeded. When the body supports the wind and wind supports the mind, these three form the foundation on which mind can be quickly trained.

## THE BASIC MEDITATION POSTURE

To begin your meditation practice, you can use this very simple approach to the seven-point posture:

1. Sit on a soft cushion on the floor with your legs crossed. If you can, sit in the full- or half-lotus posture. In full lotus, both feet rest on top of the thighs, with the soles turned up. If this is too difficult, sit in the half-lotus posture, resting one foot on the floor under the other leg, and the other foot on top of the opposite thigh. If you have knee or back problems, sit on a chair. In order to have good concentration, it's important not to be in pain. The crucial thing is that your spine is straight.

2. Place your hands in one of two contemplative gestures. Placing your hands palms down over your knees straightens the hands and the flow of wind energy in the body. The second, more traditional way is to cradle the back of your right or left hand in the palm of the other hand, with both palms up. The thumbs are touching to form a lotus or jewel. Position the hands four finger widths below the navel, resting on your feet or touching the thighs and abdomen, with the tips of the thumbs almost at the level of the navel. It's essential for the energy in the hands to flow, so the body needs to be straight. If this posture is too difficult, or if you have long arms and hands, place your hands on your knees.

3. The spine should be as straight "as an arrow piercing from the apex of your head down to your seat."

4. The shoulders are also straight, pulled back but relaxed, with the arms parallel to the sides of the body, "as an eagle ready to take flight."

5. The chin is tucked in gently toward the Adam's apple. The neck is therefore slightly bent but not too tight. This chin position helps to straighten the spine.

6. The tip of the tongue should touch the front of the palate or the base of the front teeth.

7. The eyes are open and the gaze flows down the slope of the nose to a point directly in front of you. Take that point as a support for maintaining mindfulness. Maintain the posture with your eyes open. Closing the eyes only seems to facilitate practice; it brings only temporary one-pointedness. The eyes are the main gateways of distraction and need to be trained. Otherwise distractions will arise when you open your eyes.

## THREE PRELIMINARY STEPS TO MEDITATION

Begin your meditation session with these three simple preliminaries: first, generate a sense of strong commitment; second, generate genuine devotion to the Three Jewels by taking refuge; and third, dedicate your practice for the benefit of all beings by generating a strong sense of bodhichitta.

By generating compassion and devotion to the teacher and the Three Jewels, we become genuinely aware of the essence that should be taken into meditation. Everything we have talked about up to this point is contained in these three simple steps.

## BASIC MEDITATION TECHNIQUE

In shamatha meditation, the gaze is especially important. Using an external object—a pebble, stick, statue, or candle flame—can temporarily free the mind from disturbances and distractions. Together with the posture, concentrating on a focal point in front of you allows the one-pointedness of shamatha to arise. When the mind is still, try to remain in that stillness and strengthen it. When the mind shifts, go back to the beginning. If one-pointed focus creates a sense of dullness, sleepiness, boredom, or laziness, relax the gaze. One antidote is to lift the gaze upward, then allow it to slowly come down.

You can also develop one-pointedness in “formless” shamatha by focusing on the breath. When meditation is more stable, training the breath is especially useful. Taking your posture, dissolve the six senses on the in-breath and bring awareness to the out-breath. If it’s difficult to let go of grasping at distractions,

you can begin by counting the breaths. One-pointed concentration is developed by allowing the mind to actually mingle with the breath.

Rest the mind completely in whatever arises. For example, if a thought arises, label the thought “thinking” and let it go. Labeling thoughts and letting them go is using the thought as a reference for one-pointedness. You could also label any sight, sound, and so on—and just leave it at that. Rest the mind without elaborating with adjectives like good or bad, perfect or imperfect, great or small. Do not analyze, interpret, or judge. In this way, take whatever arises as the reference for one-pointedness.

When the resting mind becomes distracted, there are two ways to bring it back. The basic antidote is to breathe in and allow the mind to settle again. Another way is to come back by allowing whatever has arisen to dissolve. This antidote is like throwing a pebble into a lake and letting it sink, becoming one with the lake like a drop of water. In the same way, recognize any thought that arises as a distraction and allow it to sink, becoming inseparable from settledness.

Your practice sessions need not last too long. Begin with short frequent sessions. In shorter sessions, we are able to identify the gap, that small, still moment of complete dissolution of concept. Sitting regularly for even ten or fifteen minutes is a good way to begin. If you can sit for forty minutes or an hour a day, that is good, but it doesn’t have to be all at once.

Keep in mind that various instructions for meditation need not conflict with one another. There are many suitable methods. The important thing is to find one that works for you. Basically, shamatha meditation can be done in any posture. You can sit on a zafu and zabuton or sit on the ground if you have no cushion; you don’t need a certain kind of cushion to get your shamatha done. The important thing is your mindfulness-awareness meditation. If a certain posture is helpful to your practice, do shamatha in that posture. If you have difficulties with a certain posture or set of instructions, you can work with it.

Meditation practice is a journey. We begin in a very deliberate way, and as our confidence grows, we can relax. The most important thing for beginning your meditation journey is to find someone qualified to give you instruction and to clarify your questions.

Rinpoche, Khandro. *This Precious Life*. Boston: Shambalah Publications, 2005. pages 169-173

## SHAKYAMUNI GURU-BUDDHA, EMPTINESS AND BLESSING THE SPEECH

Imagine your room is clean and tidy, and the altar is dust free, with its images neatly arranged. And then imagine

Your offerings have been placed neatly on the altar in front of the images.

And you recite your Preliminary Motivation [p2-3], prostrate, and recite the Guru Shakyamuni mantra and prayer [p4].

And then you take your seat [see your Discovering Buddhism commentary],

And purify the place [p4], bless the offerings, and say the power of truth [p5].

*And then imagine // that above the crown of your head // is a lotus of light // and sitting above that // on sun and moon cushions // is your primary teacher of this life // dressed in the robes // of a fully ordained monk. // He has his hands in prayer at his heart.*

And then imagine, Shakyamuni Buddha, appearing in front of you [p5-7].

*He is the father of your spiritual family // which includes all of your teachers, // the lineage masters, // and the buddhas and bodhisattvas // the solitary realizers and arhats // the deities, // the dakas and dakinis, // and Dharma protectors. // Can you imagine // feeling his presence // in the room? // And feeling his presence // in the room //*

Then read or recite the Refuge meditation, and the Refuge Prayer, and imagine the flow of nectar. Then recite the Bodhicitta meditation, the Four Immeasurable Thoughts prayer, and the Special Bodhicitta prayer [p9-11].

*And in response to these prayers // all your teachers and your ancestors // who practiced the paths of compassionate love, // the profound view and tantra, // dissolve into Shakyamuni Buddha // And then he dissolves // into the root teacher // on your crown, // and they become inseparable. // Now your guru appears // as Shakyamuni Buddha // and embodies all the objects of Refuge.*

And you recite the prayer with the Seven Limbs. You offer a short mandala and recite the Prayer of the Three Great Purposes. You send the mandala and make the Requests [p12-14] and then recite from METHOD TO TRANSFORM the

DIRECT MEDITATION ON THE GRADUATED PATH [P5].

And then you make the Request to Descend to the Crown, recite the mantra and imagine the flow of light and nectar [p17-18] and then from the METHOD

RECITE VERSES ONE AND TWO [P8].

And then imagine the Absorption taking place and rejoicing [p18] And while in that state of joy, imagine hearing the Buddha say

*O child of the lineage // who is sitting on your seat? //*  
*And you reply // . . . I am. //*

*And the Buddha says, // is the collection of your body and mind // also on that seat? //*  
*And you reply // . . . Yes; // they are. //*

*And so the Buddha asks, // are you // **exactly the same** // as the collection // of that body and mind? //*  
*And you reply // . . . No; // I am not. //*

*And the Buddha says, // O child of the lineage, // why **are you not** // exactly the same // as the collection // of the body and mind? //*  
*And you reply . . . **I** am not // exactly the same // as the collection // of the body and mind // because the collection // is the basis // for the imputation // and **I** // am the imputed object.*

*And then the buddha says to you; // O child of the lineage, // please // remove yourself // from the seat. //*

*And after leaving the seat // the buddha says // Now child of the lineage // what is on that seat? //*

Imagine that space // is the nature of // pristine luminous light // the wisdom of infinite bliss, // inseparable from emptiness // and then ... METHOD

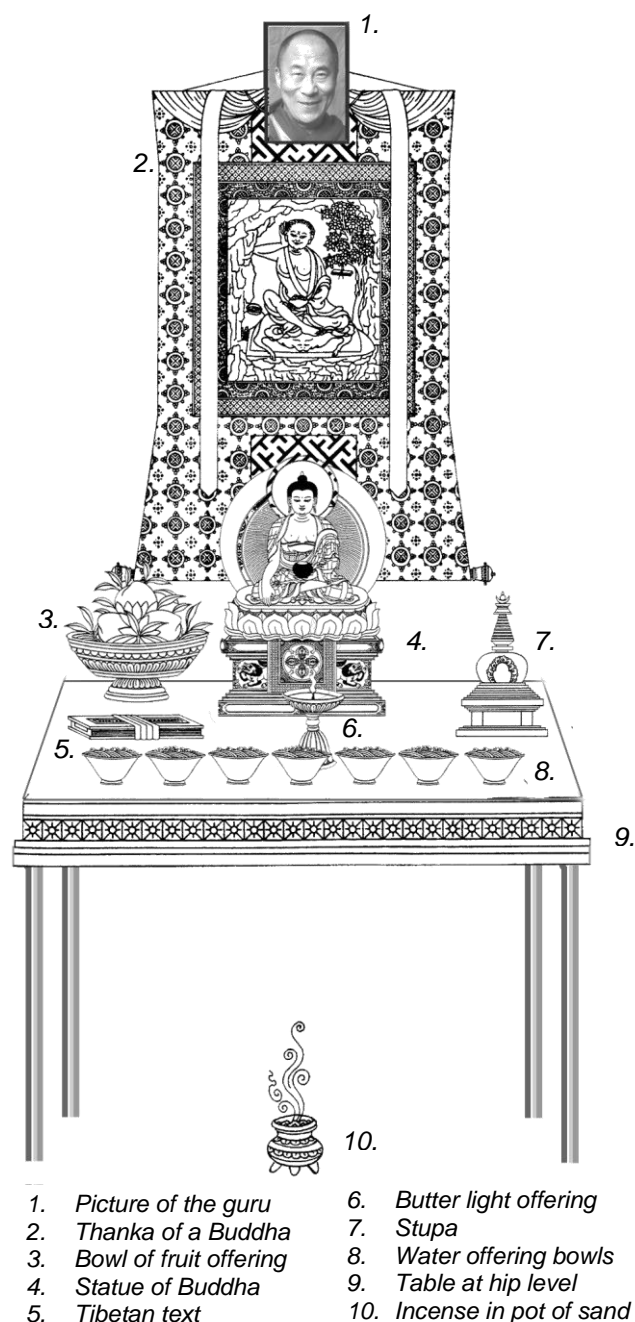
ARISE AS THE DEITY AND BEGIN THE PROCESS TO **BLESS THE SPEECH** [P13-15]

AND THEN TURN BACK TO READ FROM P8-11

And then read the dedication prayers [p19-22]

*\*This structure can be used as a means to combine the meditations of the Shakyamuni Buddha and the Purification of Speech, Guru yoga and emptiness.*

# Setting Up Your Altar



## What goes on an altar?

- Building an altar is not about worshipping idols - but a reminder of universal qualities.
- It is a tool to engage with the ultimate qualities of an enlightened being. It is also a powerful method to accumulate virtue by offering and prostrating.
- It has images or representations of the holy body, speech and mind of a Buddha.
- Offerings, especially of light and the water bowls, but also incense, flowers.
- Photos of your gurus and teachers.
- Make it so that just looking at the altar makes you happy and inspired, so we want to go there often.
- You can set it up and take it down each day, or leave it permanently.

## What to offer

- Light - brings the benefit of a long life, and also symbolises wisdom. In the west we are lucky - can use electricity! Bless immediately (even light switch), otherwise fall asleep uncontrollably in teachings. Snuff out the candles, don't blow them out (so we are not spitting at Buddha or blowing away life-force).
- Incense - offered in a bowl of sand or a holder on the floor, not on altar (so don't offer ashes). Symbolises morality.
- Flowers - fake flowers are fine. Dried flowers, or poisonous ones not so good,

and make sure to cut the thorns off roses. Acquired properly (flowers not picked from someone else's garden). Symbolises compassion, our virtues.

- Food - biscuits or fruit. Clean, the best we have (not the scraps!). Don't put the rejects and keep the best for yourself! You can even offer the shopping, then put it away half an hour later. Symbolises the spiritual nourishment of realisations.
- Water - there are 2 types of offering bowls (sutra water bowls and tantra offerings), this is the water-bowl practice. Forgetting to bless causes forgetfulness or discomfort. Purifies ignorance, and a short-temper!

## Setting up an Altar

STEPS	COMMENTS
1. Placing the altar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Above hips, no lower than knees (otherwise causes sleep)</li> <li>Not at foot of bed (where feet point), and with a screen so not confused with sex</li> </ul>
2. Buddha in the centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Represents buddha's body. A statue, picture or photo</li> <li>Make sure the details are correct (try not to have just a head!) Art may be bad, but no such thing as a bad buddha!</li> <li>Can wrap in white scarf for respect</li> </ul>
3. Text to right of buddha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Represents buddha's speech</li> <li>Lam rim, or wisdom sutra (diamond cutter or heart sutra)</li> <li>Can have a book or a paper in a frame</li> </ul>
4. Stupa to left of buddha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Represents buddha's mind</li> <li>All it's dimensions represent something</li> <li>Sometimes wrapped in white scarf</li> <li>Can also have a bell (and dorje)</li> </ul>
5. Guru in centre at top	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nothing higher than the guru</li> <li>Without the guru we would not have any of the others</li> </ul>
6. Offering of light	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>LZR like to have it on 24/7</li> <li>Light represents wisdom dispelling the darkness of ignorance. A steady flame represents long life and health</li> </ul>
7. Water bowl offerings in front	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have them a level lower than the images and statues</li> <li>Can learn how to offer them at the Dharma kit-bag course</li> <li>Usually 7, but can have one nice bowl, or 3</li> <li>Practice of generosity without pride of substance (eg. gold)</li> <li>Change the water each day</li> </ul>
8. Other offerings (optional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remember to bless all the offerings as you make them!</li> <li>Food (bowl of fruit, bags of shopping, then put away later)</li> <li>Flowers (keep fresh or have fake, but not dried!)</li> <li>Incense (on the floor so we don't offer ash)</li> <li>Other things important to you, eg. LY with toy airplane</li> </ul>

## Some handy hints...

- It is better to have a clean and plain altar, rather than an elaborate and dusty one.
- Don't offer cigarette smoke! Offer what is personally precious to you.
- Lama Zopa Rinpoche recommends putting an altar in every room, and offering light to it.
- If your relatives get upset, keep the altar hidden or discreet. Use a medicine cupboard and keep the doors closed, or you can just set it up and take it down as you go.
- It's a work in progress, and a joyous adventure, relax and enjoy!



# How To Do A Short Prostration



*With hands in the prostration mudra, touch the crown, forehead, throat, and heart.*



*Touch the four places to the ground (hands first, then knees), and lightly touch the forehead to the ground.*

## What is a prostration?

A prostration is where you touch the 5 places to the ground. There are both long and short versions. If you cannot physically do them, imagine that you are doing so, standing (or sitting) with your hands in the prostration mudra. Buddhists do 3 prostrations each morning and night, as well as when entering a gumpa, and before and after teachings.

Who do we make prostrations to? The Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. Why do we prostrate? To draw closer to the qualities we aspire to and to wipe away negativities such as pride, doubt, and aversion. If it is too crowded at teachings, imagine you are doing them.

There are 3 elements of a prostration. (1) Mental prostrations (these are the most important), remembering the qualities of the buddha, (2) verbal prostrations (when we say prayers, or "OM AH HUM" or "I prostrate") that purify speech, and (3) physical prostrations, that purify negativities and problems of the body (just do the best you can).

## What to think and visualise

- Imagine coloured light and nectar radiating from the corresponding places of the Buddha, entering you and completely purifying you.
- Hands on crown creates cause to obtain Buddha's ushnisha. Visualise a replica of the Buddha you are prostrating to absorb into you, blessing you.
- Hands to forehead creates the cause for a buddha's treasure hair, also purifies negativities of the body. White light.
- Hands to throat purifies negative actions made by speech, and creates the cause to obtain melodious speech of a Buddha with 64 qualities. Red light.
- Hands to heart, purifies negative actions created by mind, and creates the cause to obtain the qualities of Buddha's mind of uncontaminated wisdom. Blue light.
- As you go down, remind yourself about the graduated path to enlightenment. When your head touches the ground think "May I attain Buddhahood."
- As you come up swinging your arms behind you, think that you take all the suffering of sentient beings and place it upon the self-cherishing attitude.

## Making a Short Prostration

STEPS	COMMENTS
1. Visualisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visualise objects of refuge in front</li> <li>You lead all surrounding sentient beings in prostrations</li> </ul>
2. Place hands in prostration mudra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have thumbs making a little table inside your palms, to hold the jewel of buddha-nature, our great potential</li> </ul>
3. Keeping the mudra, place on the crown of your head	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cause for ushnisha</li> <li>Replica of buddha absorbs into you</li> <li>Think "I prostrate to the buddha, dharma, sangha"</li> </ul>
4. Keeping the mudra, place hands to forehead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purifies negativities of the body,</li> <li>White light from the Buddha's forehead streams into your forehead</li> <li>Cause for treasure hair of the Buddha</li> </ul>
5. Keeping the mudra, place hands at throat level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purifies negativities of speech</li> <li>Cause for 60 melodious qualities of Buddha's speech</li> <li>Red light streams into your throat from the Buddha's throat</li> </ul>
6. Keeping the mudra, place hands at heart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purifies negativities of mind</li> <li>Cause for mind of uncontaminated wisdom</li> <li>Deep blue light streams from the Buddha's heart into your heart</li> </ul>
7. Touch four places to the ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hands first, then knees!</li> <li>Separate your hands and place them on the ground about a foot in front, level with your shoulders, fingers slightly apart</li> <li>Then put knees on the ground (like a child about to crawl)</li> <li>Think you are suppressing 4 negative thoughts</li> </ul>
8. Touch head to ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lightly touch forehead to the ground and lift up again</li> <li>Think you attain the enlightened state</li> </ul>
9. Standing up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stand up by pushing your knees off the ground with your hands.</li> <li>Careful not to bump person behind with your bum!</li> <li>As you rise up swinging your arms behind you, think you draw all sentient beings out of suffering</li> </ul>
10. Repeat process 2 more times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Try to rise up straight in between each prostration, though you may not have time to during teachings</li> </ul>
11. End with hands at heart and pause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Position hands at your heart in prostration mudra</li> <li>Wait until the lama sits down before you take your seat</li> </ul>

# Long Prostrations



*With hands in the prostration mudra, touch the crown, forehead, throat and heart.*



*Touch the four places to the ground (hands first, then knees). Then stretch your whole body out on the floor, stretch your arms and feet out, and lightly touch the forehead to the ground.*



*Bring hands up to crown to bless, then come up by first pushing up at level of shoulders, then at the knees.*

## About long prostrations

- There are many ways to make prostrations a meaningful activity. You can do your prostrations for another person - a sick person or someone who has just died, for people suffering a particular illness, or the beings in each of the realms.
- If you can't physically do prostrations, you can still do mental and verbal ones, by reciting the prayers and imagining you are doing them. Stand (or even sit) with your hands in the prostration mudra. Imagine your body as large as the gumpa.
- The prostration practice is a very powerful method of purification. It can be simple, or it can be very elaborate if we include extensive visualisations.

## Prayers to recite whilst doing prostrations

1. Ecstatic prostration (x3)
2. General prostration prayer (x3)
3. Names of the 35 buddhas (x3)
4. Names of the 7 medicine buddhas (x1)
5. Confession of moral downfalls (x1)

*These prayers can be found at the beginning of the FPMT Prayer Book. They take about 10-15 minutes.*

## Handy hints for prostration sessions

- Use an .mp3 with the prayer on it to prostrate to, and recite along with it. There is no need to synchronise the prayer with the prostration at first, just go at your own pace.
- Use a knee cushion and cloth sliders if you like, and a face washer for your forehead.
- Make sure put down your hands first, then knees. When you come up try to keep your knees together. This stops them becoming inflamed.
- Keep fingers together, not clenched or spread. Make it beautiful, don't slap hands down!
- Go down slowly, come up fast, and don't rest on the ground! Stand up straight in between each prostration, rather than staying bent over (to avoid causes for the lower realms).

## Visualisation and symbolism

- You can visualise yourself surrounded by all sentient beings, all making prostrations together, or you can imagine all your previous and future lives prostrating with you now.
- When you visualise the 35 Buddhas in front, visualise coloured light and nectar coming from the heart of each buddha in turn, completely purifying you.
- Hands in the prostration mudra with thumbs together inside, forming a 'table' (holding the jewel of bodhicitta), recognising your potential to become a Buddha.
- Hands on crown creates cause to obtain Buddha's ushnisa.
- Visualise light and nectar radiating from the corresponding place of the Buddha, entering you and completely purifying you.
- Hands to the forehead creates cause for a buddha's treasure hair and purifies the negativities of the body.
- Hands to the neck purifies negative actions made by speech, and creates the cause to obtain the melodious speech of a Buddha with 64 qualities.
- Hands to the heart purifies the negative actions created by mind, and creates the cause to obtain the qualities of a buddha's mind of uncontaminated wisdom
- Visualise that all the negativities of body, speech and mind leave from your lower orifices in form of snakes and scorpions etc, into the jaws of death 7 levels below, who devours them completely and is extremely blissful and satisfied.
- As you part your hands to place them on the ground, think you are letting go of all delusions and negative mind states. Think you are letting go of the dualistic view, the endless elaborations of the mind, and allowing space for the Sambhogakaya to appear.
- When you place your hands and knees on the ground, think you are crushing the five major delusions. Or you can think "I will never react to anger with anger," "I will never react to an accusation with an accusation," "I will never react to a fight with a fight," and "I will never react to an insult with an insult."
- As you gradually go down, remind yourself about the graduated path to enlightenment. Think "May I attain the 5 paths and 10 grounds". When your head touches the ground it is the 11th ground, the path of no-more-learning. Think, "May I attain Buddhahood".
- As you stretch you body on the ground, visualise as many sentient beings liberated as are atoms covered, all the way through the centre of the earth.
- As you come up and swing your arms behind you, think that you take all the suffering of mother sentient beings and placing it upon the self-cherishing attitude. Think that they are all free of suffering.



# Offering Our Food

## Why offer our food?

- One of the refuge commitments we have as Buddhists is to always offer our food and drink before eating, even just a mouthful or a lolly.
- By offering our food we can turn the inescapable chore of eating into a practice of vast generosity, and a powerful way to accumulate merit. We offer to all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and then we also offer to all sentient beings, and in particular we remember their kindness in contributing to our meal - many by giving up their own lives.
- Lama Zopa Rinpoche often says that once we have offered our food, the main work is done, and if our meal is cut short, there is no great loss.



*"These five trades ought not to be practised by a layman. What five? Trade in weapons, trade in human beings, trade in flesh, trade in alcohol and trade in poisons." - The Buddha*

## A short teaching on offering food from Lama Zopa Rinpoche

- The Hinayana way of offering food is basically as expressed in the prayer by Nagarjuna, where he says that the purpose of eating food is not to develop the body, to put on weight or become fit - purposes that come only from attachment - but simply to survive in order to practice Dharma. Food should be eaten without the three poisonous minds of ignorance, attachment or anger. With the motivation seeking your own freedom from samsara, offer your food to the Triple Gem and then eat. This is the Hinayana way of eating food.
- The Mahayana Sutra way of eating food is to dedicate every spoonful of food and mouthful of drink to all sentient beings, including those living in your body. In this way you make a connection with all sentient beings such that when, in future lives, they eventually become human, you can reveal the Dharma to them and lead them to enlightenment. The Mahayana way of offering food is thus done with bodhicitta motivation, as are all the daily actions of a Mahayana practitioner, thereby becoming a cause for achieving enlightenment.
- The Mahayana tantra way of eating food is to see yourself, your guru and the deity as one, and make every bite of food and every mouthful of drink a tsog offering. Offer everything you eat and drink to the three: guru, deity and yourself.
- Through this Mahayana practice, which is based on the Hinayana and adorned with the Vajrayana, your life becomes most beneficial, not only for yourself, but for all sentient beings.

## Food Offering Prayers

### Offering food and drink to the guru

Imagine the food as blissful wisdom nectar inside a vast jewelled vessel. Offer this to a small Buddha visualised at your heart. As you eat or drink, imagine that Guru Shakyamuni Buddha at your heart, who embodies the Triple Gem, experiences bliss from the nectar you have offered. He radiates light which fills your entire body.

OM AH HUM (recite 3x)

la.ma sang.gyā la.ma chö  
de.zhin la.ma ge.dün te  
kün.gyi je.po la.ma yin  
la.ma nam.la kyab.su chi

The guru is Buddha, the guru is Dharma,  
The guru is Sangha also.

The guru is the creator of all (happiness).  
To all gurus, I make this offering.

### Mantras for Blessing Meat

Nowhere in the Buddha's teachings will you find the instruction to forgo meat, although you are admonished not to kill or to have someone kill for you. Sometimes you may have to eat meat for health reasons, for reasons of economy, or if you are offered meat by others.

Recite the following mantras, then blow gently on the meat. Due to the force of the karmic connection with the being whose body this meat was, the consciousness of that being will receive blessings.



#### Medicine Buddha mantra (short)

TADYATHA / OM BHAISHAJYE BHAISHAJYE / MAHA  
BHAISHAJYE / RAJA SAMUDGATE SVAHA

[Common pronunciation: TA YA TA / OM BEKANZAY BEKANZAY /  
MAHA BEKANZAY / RADZA SAMUDGATAY SOHA]

### Mitrugpa Buddha mantra

NAMO RATNATRAYAYA / OM KAMKANI KAMKANI / ROCHANI  
ROCHANI / TROTANI TROTANI / TRASANI TRASANI /  
PRATIHANA PRATIHANA / SARVA KARMA / PARAM PARA NI ME /  
SARVA SATTYA NANCHI / SVAHA



#### Milarepa's mantra

OM AH GURU HASA VAJRA SARVA SIDDHI PHALA HUM

