

# AN OUTLINE OF THE PRELIMINARY PRACTICES

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NAMO GURU PADMA MANJUSHRIYÉ

At the outset of giving these instructions, students should recite the seven line supplication 100,000 times, using the instructions and visualizations taught in the Padmasambhava guru yoga practice titled *Shower of Blessings*. Having opened the gate of blessings with this practice, they may then proceed to the following three stages:

- The common preliminaries (the four contemplations that change the mind)
- The five unique preliminaries (refuge etc...)
- The main practice of the Great Perfection

## THE COMMON PRELIMINARIES

THE RARITY OF THE FREEDOMS AND ENDOWMENTS

In this section, there are four points to contemplate:

- The essence of the freedoms and endowments
- The rarity of the freedoms and endowments
- Their great value when found
- The importance of not letting them go to waste

The eight freedoms consist of the absence of the eight states of restriction, four of which are non-human states (hell beings, spirits, animals, and long-life gods) and four of which are human (those born in borderlands, those with distorted beliefs, those in realms where buddhas have not appeared, and those whose senses are impaired). Focus on one of these eight in each session, contemplating in a precise, step-by-step manner how you are now free of each one. Once you have thoroughly contemplated one topic, move on to the next.

Then take the same approach with the ten endowments. The first five of these are personal endowments: to be human, to have the five senses intact, to have been born in a central land, to not have a misguided livelihood, and to have faith in the Buddhist teachings. Next are the five circumstantial endowments: for a buddha to have come, taught the Dharma, for the teachings to remain, the presence of a tradition of practice, and the presence of the entire range of conducive factors, such as spiritual teachers. Think to

yourself how incredibly rare it is to become human. Given the prevalence of those in the three lower realms and other such places, how amazing it is that you have now attained a human existence!

In the same way, the opposites of all the rest of the endowments are numerous, and since you now have these qualities in their entirety, it would be a big mistake to let them go to waste. Think this over well with a sense of inner certainty, contemplating all of these points in a thorough manner.

Second, ponder the fact that if each of these is difficult to come by on its own, how incredibly rare it must be to have all of them, as you do now. This extraordinary support for the Dharma is extremely difficult to come by. Having considered this from a general point of view, next think about how rare this situation has been in the past, and how such circumstances will not be encountered again and again in the future. Hence, the time has now come to do something worthwhile. More specifically, you can think this over in more detail by contemplating the rarity of the freedoms and endowments in terms of their relative improbability, their causes, and the various metaphors that are taught in the scriptures.

Third, contemplate how the stage is set to accomplish something of lasting benefit now that this support has been attained. For this very reason, it would be a mistake to do something negative or of little importance. The value of this human existence cannot even be compared to a jeweled vase or other such objects.

Fourth, now that you've found something so precious, how sad it would be to not derive any benefit from it for even a single morning. This physical body swiftly decays and lacks any essence of its own. For these very reasons, you shouldn't use it for anything other than that which will be of lasting benefit; you shouldn't waste it on things of little importance. Contemplate these topics over and over again and use whatever means necessary to bring about a transformation in your mind. The result of this practice is the emergence of a mental transformation that will be quite unlike anything you may have experienced in the past. You should think all this over carefully until a suitable degree of change has actually taken place.

#### IMPERMANENCE

Ponder the fact that though you may have attained such a rare human existence, it won't last long; human existence is transitory like a flash of lightning in the sky. Both the external universe and the beings that inhabit it are sure to perish. Death is certain and there is no way to know when it will strike—these are the four topics you should contemplate. With the changes of the four seasons and the passing phases of origination, abiding, destruction, and emptiness, the whole of existence has been destroyed in the past

and even now is decaying down to each and every atom. In the future just the same will come to pass; the nature of conditioned phenomena is nothing more than this.

Once you've thoroughly contemplated this topic, turn your attention to the second topic—the impermanence of all the beings that inhabit the universe. Regardless of whether they have long lives or short ones, there is no one who does not die in the end. The mighty and the weak alike all pass away.

If even the Buddha and his followers grew old and eventually died, why even mention that the same will happen to you. More specifically, the short lifespan you have now is nothing to place your trust in. Consider the fact that within one hundred years, not a single person will be left of those living now.

Third, contemplate how from the time we are all born, our lives run out with each passing moment, as though we are being led to place of our own execution or are water plunging off a cliff. In these dark times, beings only live to be sixty or seventy years old. Since the past is already gone, there is one thing we know for sure: we will all die. While this may be the case, we deceive ourselves and don't give this any thought. Think about all this with a sense of inner certainty and conviction.

There is no telling when death will strike, for everyone dies thinking that they will live a little longer. Death strikes young and old alike. The circumstances that cause death, moreover, are many. Just eating a meal, for example, can bring illness and death. Consider all the various instances that show how we simply cannot be sure when we will die. Though we are alive this year, how do we know whether or not we will be here next the next? We might not even make it through this year and be dead by year's end. Just so, fix your mind on the fact that over the course of a single month our lives are getting shorter and shorter; think this over well.

If this alone doesn't convince you, ponder how we have no grounds to be confident that we won't die, how we can never be sure what will cause our death, and how there isn't anyone whose life is coming to a close who doesn't pass away wishing not to die and clinging to the hope to live longer.

As this is the case, then what's the point of all this self-deception? Make the fact that you can't be sure when you will die the focal point of your deliberations. Death strikes without warning or provocation, often just as we think we'll keep on living. It won't help, however, to remember the Dharma just as we're on the verge of death and breathing our last breath. So why wouldn't you practice the Dharma diligently now, when there is no illness or other such factor to keep you from doing so? Again, consider this carefully until you really become focused, reminding yourself to do whatever it takes to practice the Dharma.

#### THE PRINCIPLE OF KARMIC CAUSALITY

Begin by contemplating this topic in a general manner. From the point of view of the way things appear, the entirety of samsara and nirvana exists due to the unending process of interdependent origination—causality. More specifically, pleasure, in all of its subtle and more obvious forms, results from virtue, whereas all manifestations of unhappiness result from non-virtue. Hence, none of these appears of its own accord.

Next, examine the principle of causality from a more detailed perspective. Specifically, contemplate how the ten virtuous and ten nonvirtuous acts produce their respective results. These include the fully ripened result, the two results that accord with their cause (those of actions and experiences), and the dominant result.\* Ponder in great detail how each of these is experienced, contemplating each and every step of the process in the correct order.

Third, contemplate the inevitability of causality. Karma even continues to ripen for those who are in their last existence. Even the hand of the Buddha cannot stop the various forms of happiness and discontent experienced by sentient beings. One must have conviction, therefore, in the fact that causality is inevitable.

Fourth, what one does will ripen on oneself, even acts that are relatively minor forms of virtue or negativity; nothing else would make sense. Our acts, therefore, are like medicine and poison in terms of their potential [to impact our lives]. Diligently contemplate how you should adopt certain things and reject others in the correct manner, with the knowledge that it is in your own best interest to do so. Think about this until you decide once and for all that there is no choice but to work for your own welfare by accepting certain acts and rejecting others in the correct manner.

#### THE SUFFERING OF SAMBARA

Begin with a detailed investigation. Contemplate with great diligence the manner in which each of the six classes of existence experiences suffering, both those in the three lower realms as well as those in the three higher realms. Next, think about suffering from a general point of view. Whether one's place in samsara is high or low, one will be bound by the three forms of suffering. In particular, consider how we are bound by impermanence and the conditioned nature of things and cultivate a sense of certainty that samsara is nothing you can rely upon.

To reverse your obsession with samsara, think about how the very nature of cyclic existence entails suffering, yet we still harbor the mistaken idea that it is actually pleasurable. No matter how much pleasure we experience, we are never satisfied. And no matter how much we suffer, we never grow weary of it all. Think about this hidden flaw of samsara: that so long as we do not attain liberation, we will be perpetually mired in suffering.

Finally, consider the fact that here in samsara our lives are dictated by birth and death, which brings us the experience of boundless and incalculable suffering. With this

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\* Author's note: the result of individual effort is that whatever one does will intensify and have an increasingly powerful impact on the succession of one's future lives. When this is counted, there are five results in all.

in mind, generate a sense of unease and form the resolve to attain a lasting state of happiness here and now.

Since all of the above are analytic meditations that should be investigated one by one, you should contemplate them over and over while employing a variety of different approaches.

# THE UNIQUE PRELIMINARIES

## REFUGE

To begin, you must recognize the sources of refuge. This includes the only true refuge from the ocean of samsara's suffering, the Three Jewels, as well as the inner sources of refuge in the Secret Mantra tradition, the Three Roots. Think to yourself, "Both I and all others, from now until we've reached the very heart of enlightenment, take refuge in these sources of refuge." As you keep this in mind, visualize your guru in the sky before you in the form of Vajradhara of Oddiyana, with the lineage gurus situated above him. In front of him is the king of the Shakyas and the other buddhas; to his right, the eight close sons and the other Mahayana bodhisattvas; behind him, the Buddhist scriptures, representing the Dharmas of transmission and realization; to his left, the eight supreme shravakas and the rest of the Hinayana sangha; and in the space that surrounds them, the yidams and the assembly of deities of the various classes of tantra, surrounded by the warriors, dakinis, wisdom Dharma protectors, and guardians.

In the presence of this embodiment of all sources of refuge, visualize both you yourself and every other sentient being, headed by your mother and father, taking refuge and showing great respect physically, verbally, and mentally. From the very depths of your heart, accumulate the refuge verses; this is what will subdue your mind. At the end of the session, visualize the sources of refuge melting into light and dissolving into you and all the other sentient beings, transforming you all into buddhas. Finally, dedicate the virtue you have accumulated.

## BODHICITTA

When taking a more extensive approach, one may explain the benefits of cultivating bodhicitta, as this is the factor that sets the Mahayana path apart from other approaches. One may also explain the manner in which the bodhicitta vow is taken, the precepts involved, and so forth. The essential points to contemplate, however, are as follows: To start, you must understand that all sentient beings have been your own parents. You must then train your mind in love and the rest of the four boundless qualities. With this as the cause, you should then form the resolve to attain unsurpassed, true, and genuine buddhahood for the welfare of all sentient beings.

As you cultivate supreme bodhicitta in a heartfelt manner, visualize the field of accumulation as described above, again with both you and all others situated before it. Then, with a firm commitment to formally cultivate bodhicitta, accumulate 100,000 recitations of the verses for bodhicitta. Conclude the session as outlined above.

## VAJRASATTVA

To begin, generate enthusiasm for the practice by reflecting on how the meditation and recitation of Vajrasattva is the main method for purifying negativity and obstacles. Next, visualize Vajrasattva on the crown of your head, seated on a lotus and moon disc seat. As you confess with all four powers, visualize a cleansing stream of amrita flowing down as you recite the one hundred syllable mantra. To conclude, imagine the deity at your crown melting into light and dissolving into you. You and all sentient beings then transform into Vajrasattva. Finally, as you recite the six syllable mantra imagine that the sound of the mantra is emitted from all your mouths, and then bring the session to a close.

## MANDALA OFFERING

The mandala offering is the main practice for gathering the accumulations. Maintain the visualization and attitude of offering the manifold mandala: offering your own body and belongings, as well as the array of apparent existence, meaning the external world and its inhabitants that manifest and are caused by virtuous endeavors. Accompanying this with all the wealth and richness that comprises the realms of the three pure kayas, visualize the field of accumulation as described above and envision yourself offering it in their presence. As you do so, accumulate repetitions of the mandala offering.

## GURU YOGA

The profound path of guru yoga opens one to blessings and fosters the birth of realization. Begin by clearly explaining the way in which this practice is the root of blessings, as well as the stages of visualization. As the seven branch offering is recited, you should make supplications and so forth, and accumulate 100,000 prostrations. Following this, perform the main part of the practice in tandem with supplications. At the end of each session, take the four empowerments, merge your mind with the guru's, and then simply let be in your natural state.

For the main practice, *The Wheel of Analysis and Meditation: Thoroughly Refining Mental Activity* and other such topics may be taught. These instructions should be given in such a way that a stable experience of each of these five is developed prior to continuing on to the next topic. This will lead to the attainment of the warmth of spiritual experience and realization.

*This was written as a basic outline for explaining these teachings by Mipam. May virtue and goodness flourish...Mangalam!*

*Translated by Tsultrim Shönu [Cortland Dahl] under the direction of Khenpo Sherab Sangpo (Spring, 2007).*