

A White Tara Commentary, by Geshe Wangdu, given at Tse Chen Ling Center For Tibetan Buddhist Studies, San Francisco.

Lightly edited.

[Note: It's traditionally taught that what's called 'self-generation' - where one visualizes oneself as the deity - should only be done by those who have received the initiation of a particular deity, but that 'front generation' - where one visualizes the deity in space above and in front of oneself - can be done by anyone.]

From August 14th, 1996:

The main motivation for receiving this initiation is that we wish to have a long life, free from illness, in order to practice Dharma for the sake of living beings.

The main focus, and the direct benefit, then, is for one's own long life; indirectly, the purpose is to practice the teachings so we can help all other living beings.

White Tara Commentary, August 28th, 1996:

I thought that it would be beneficial to go over the sadhana of White Tara, the White Tara sadhana practice, and that that would be beneficial for those who wish in the future to do a retreat on White Tara.

So there is here a very brief form of the sadhana, which I will go over first, and then I can go more extensively after that.

The brief form of the White Tara sadhana that I have now and will be commenting upon is a sadhana which the Tibetan great master Pabonkha Rinpoche has composed, and it's a very brief form, in fact only two pages. (Geshe-la, in English: 'I think it's composed especially for westerners!') (laughter).

If one were to do a retreat on White Tara, it would be highly beneficial for oneself and for others. The results would be that one's mind would be much calmer, and one would gain more knowledge and intellect, and also, the other immediate benefits would be that one would have good health, and long life, and also what we call material wealth as well. The particular, immediate benefits of doing White Tara practice are said to be that one will have success in whatever one pursues, whether it's spiritual or material-wise.

In one of the praises to White Tara, which is in the form of a prayer, or in stanzas, one of the stanzas at the end mentions that by praising White Tara, and by praising and respect, and by doing salutations to White Tara, those who wish to have children will have children; those who wish to have sons will have sons; those who wish to have daughters will gain daughters; those who wish to have possessions will gain possessions; and furthermore, all negativity and obstacles for one's practices would be all vanquished- that is one of the stanzas.

The most essential point is to do the sadhana in the proper way, with faith, and if one follows all the commitments and does it sincerely, with faith, then definitely the results will come.

Unlike other Buddhist deities, White Tara is known to be a deity which, if one follows the practice, it is one of the most simple practices. And it is very easy for us to follow and to do- not like other deities, such as Yamantaka or Guhyasamaja, other deities where the forms are even difficult to visualize.

And in fact, the mantra itself being short, one is able to complete a retreat with reciting one hundred-thousand times the mantra in one week, with four sessions or even in three sessions a day. After the retreat then of course it would be highly beneficial to do a fire puja as well, and that of course can be done in places like Vajrapani where people there can help and know about it.

Then, furthermore, one of the main benefits, again, of doing White Tara practice, especially a retreat, is that one will be very influential and powerful in helping others. One of the other deities is also Yamantaka, which is said to be a very powerful, influential practice to do. Particularly one becomes powerful and will get the abilities to help and benefit others, especially people who are sick or unwell in any way.

Now I'll go over the brief sadhana, according to the text.

The first line reads here that, after sitting down, one should do what we call taking the refuge and generating bodhicitta. And after that is done, then one should meditate upon emptiness. Particularly one should visualize oneself as becoming the nature of emptiness.

One should imagine that one's gross body, the physical body, fades away, and transforms into the nature of emptiness.

One can actually imagine that one's physical body is fading away into space. And then one should feel particularly that it is the nature of emptiness.

After one's gross physical body is transformed into emptiness, then within that emptiness one should imagine that a white lotus arises from that empty space, a white lotus.

On the thangka up there, portraying White Tara, the lotus has been portrayed as being a pink lotus, however in the text it is said that the lotus

should be white- a white lotus which has a thousand petals, which of course is quite enormous, quite big.

So then on top of the thousand petaled lotus one visualizes a moon-disk, a full moon-disk, which is flat on its surface.

I'd like to give a description of the significance of the lotus and the moon, and on many portraits of the deity there's also a sun-disk, however, all in common have, definitely, a lotus and a moon-disk, and I'd like to give the significance of them.

The lotus signifies renunciation. So, renunciation, to give a brief definition, is a wish, or the spontaneous wish to be free from cyclic existence, the wish to be free from that and to reach the state of liberation, nirvana. That sort of spontaneous wish or state of mind is renunciation.

Even if one is an ordinary being, without any realizations, if one were to have the renounced mind, then the faults of what we call samsara, the faults of what we call cyclic existence wouldn't hinder that person.

So the manner in which the lotus signifies renunciation is that, even though the lotus itself was born out of a pond, what we call a swamp, or a muddy pond, even though it grows out of that, when it blooms on top of the water, there's not even a bit of mud on its' petals, and it is free of the mud itself. That is how it resembles renunciation.

Having the renounced state of mind in one's continuum would be the same, where even though one is born from the cyclic existence, if one doesn't have the faults or the clinging to the cyclic existence, then the mind itself would be pure, as the lotus is pure, being unstained by the mud.

So the particular lotus we are talking about here, which resembles renunciation, is a particular lotus which grows in a swamp (which means

that the whole surface is full of mud itself), and even though it grows out of a swamp, the mud of the swamp doesn't stain onto the petals.

So, if one knows the significance of a lotus, then as soon as one sees a lotus, it's a reminder of what it signifies, which is renunciation, the renounced state of mind which we should generate.

Then, the moon-disk signifies bodhicitta, the wish to achieve enlightenment. The way the moon signifies that is that, when the full moon is out in the evening, as soon as that light comes forth, whoever is out in the moonlight feels a soothing effect, and particularly when it's very dark and there's no other light around.

When the moonlight is shining upon anyone, one feels a soothing effect, and that soothing effect is felt by everyone in the moonlight. So, similarly, the bodhicitta mind, the altruistic wish to achieve enlightenment, that sort of mind itself is a powerful mind where whoever has that mind brings a soothing effect for whoever is around.

So, whatever deity, or whatever is sitting on top of a lotus and moon-disk, that deity has achieved that state of mind, of renunciation and bodhicitta.

Some deities, as mentioned earlier, have on top of the lotus a sun-disk and a moon disk. First, a sun-disk, and then on top of the sun-disk, a moon-disk. Some deities have what you call the cushion of the lotus, the sun and moon-disk, all three.

The sun signifies emptiness, the understanding of emptiness, the wisdom realizing emptiness, in this way: as soon as the sun-rays come forth, it's very bright, and it illuminates everything; similarly, whoever has that wisdom realizing emptiness, it illuminates the nature of all existence, and the nature of all existence becomes very clear to that being.

That's how, by generating the wisdom realizing emptiness, all other doubts and all other ignorant states of mind are automatically extinguished. Therefore, the sun signifies wisdom, what we call the wisdom realizing emptiness.

So, after one visualizes the lotus and then the moon-disk upon the lotus, then one visualizes the syllable TAM, which is in fact the essence of one's own mind. The syllable TAM signifies our mind.

One should visualize that this syllable is made of white, radiating light.

So that syllable TAM which one has visualized, now we should imagine that transforming into White Tara. You know how like on T.V. ads, or whatever, we see things, there's something there and sometimes, suddenly it transforms, especially on song clips, you see faces transforming into different things. So this TAM we should imagine it transforming, itself, transforming into White Tara deity.

First there's nothing, and that nothingness transforms into a lotus and a moon-disk, and on top of that the syllable TAM, right? So then that syllable TAM now transforms into White Tara deity.

The text mentions the form of the White Tara deity. It says it has 'one face and two arms...' - it may sound strange to us in the beginning to say that. Why should they be mentioning 'one face and two arms'?, because we all have one face and two arms anyway. The reason why they specify one face and two arms is because there are many deities who have many faces and many arms, so it is specifying that this particular deity is with one face and two arms.

The right hand is in the mudra of Supreme Generosity, which means that, 'If you are willing, I will give you the ability to achieve enlightenment in this very lifetime'. That mudra itself signifies that the deity is willing to

grant us the state of enlightenment. It's a mudra of generosity.

And in the left hand one should visualize the deity holding a white lotus flower called 'utpala'. The lotus stem goes out in three branches, and each stem of the branch has a different flower- one which is already opened and in full bloom, one which is about to open, and one which is just a bud. These three represent the Buddhas of the three times.

The three different buds representing the Buddhas of the three times signifies that the Buddhas of the three times all had to rely upon White Tara in order to achieve enlightenment. White Tara is the Mother Goddess for all the Buddhas of the past, present, and the future, and it's only by relying on White Tara deity that the Buddhas have achieved their state of enlightenment. So that's why White Tara is known as the Mother of all Buddhas.

And then there's seven eyes- an eye on the forehead and two eyes where you have eyes normally, one eye each on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet.

This portrait of the White Tara deity is a very good one. I found it to be very perfect in every way, so of course if you can get copies like this, then it will be very nice for you.

In here it explains that it should be a sixteen year-old youth, the facial expression... This portrait really portrays that. Maybe we can get laser scans of this...

Then of course when we visualize the actual body of the deity White Tara, we should not visualize and imagine it as being like our body, in a gross form, but rather the body itself is a body of light.

This reminds me of a question asked to me once in Dharmasala by a western monk who had difficulty in doing a meditation, particularly a visualization where one absorbs the lama into one's self. And he was relating to me that he finds it very difficult to absorb the lama into himself. When it comes to the top of his crown it feels like it's stuck there. So then I told him that that's maybe because you are visualizing the lama in a normal gross physical body, and in fact that itself is not proper.

We should visualize the lama above our head as having the nature of light, which is what is called an uncontaminated body, which is in the nature of light.

In fact it is mentioned that when we reach the third level of a bodhisattva that the physical body itself transforms into a light body, but in fact it's even more profound than that. The body of the Buddha is in fact all completely light, no stain of contamination, and it is the very nature of what we call a light body.

So therefore that is visualized, and it's even easier when we do the visualization of the body merging into ourselves.

So, although one should be visualizing one's teacher as being the actual Buddha, for that is the practice in general, when we do the meditation it shows that one part of our mind is fixed onto our guru's body as being flesh and bones, and that obstructs our meditation when we do the meditation of absorption, or merging the teacher into ourselves. So there's that conflict in our minds at that time.

Next, the White Tara deity is adorned with many jewels, head ornaments, precious jewels, and the clothes are silk garments, and of different kinds of colors. And again, even the clothing we shouldn't imagine as being like physical material, but in the form of light.



The aura on the back is shaped like a moon. Then one should visualize the three syllables at the three points, which is a white OM at the crown of the head, a red AH at the throat, and a blue HUNG at the heart.

So again, one should visualize at one's heart, even though it's not mentioned particularly here, through other sadhanas I know that one has to visualize a lotus, again a white lotus, and on top of the lotus a moon-disk, and on top of that the syllable TAM again, which is white, white light.

Then after having visualized the white syllable TAM, in white light, one visualizes light rays emanating from that TAM. The light rays go throughout all the ten directions, (which actually, literally means all directions), and then that light invokes all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas from the ten directions, and then by invoking the Buddhas and bodhisattvas from the ten directions, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas from the ten directions merge into one's self, which is the White Tara deity.

One should imagine the merging as being like, for example, if it snows on a lake, as soon as the snowflakes hit the water, it just merges into the water. There's nothing left over. So that should be how we imagine the Buddhas and bodhisattvas all merging into ourselves, which is in the form of the White Tara deity. And we become one with all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, we merge with all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. And then at that moment, after we have visualized that all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas have merged into ourselves, at that very instant we should very strongly feel that we have become one with all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

It is said that when doing this visualization, where the light rays invoke all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas from all the ten directions, it is not necessary to imagine them merging into oneself from the top of one's crown. That is not necessary. It can be merging from all directions throughout every part of our body.

Then one visualizes that the deity of initiation gives us an initiation. And after having received the initiation from the initiation deity, then on the crown of our heads, which is in White Tara's form, we imagine that the long-life Buddha Amitayus resides there.

After having visualized the Amitayus on the top of our crown, which ornaments the crown, then again we visualize light rays emanating from the syllable TAM at the heart, and this time the light rays radiate into all the directions, and not particularly to all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, but all throughout the universe, and to the five elements within the universe, the fire, water, wind, earth and space elements, all the five elements, and to what we call all the riches of the kings, all the riches and beauties of the kings and queens in this universe, in fact all the jewels and any beautiful object in the universe is invoked by the light rays emanating from our heart.

And we should imagine that the light rays are extracting all the qualities from the five elements, from all the riches and all the beauties within the universe, and it extracts it and brings forth what we call the essence back into us, in the form of light rays.

An example would be like when a magnet, a powerful magnet is put in the middle, and you have small pieces of iron all around. When the magnet is put amongst those pieces of iron, it suddenly draws in all the small pieces. That would be how we should imagine the essences, all the good qualities, the compassion and the good qualities of all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and also the good qualities of the riches and beauties of all the different parts of the universe are extracted and brought to us. And they merge into the syllable TAM.

Also at the same time we imagine that the essence of what we call the life force, the essence of merit, and the essence of all the nourishment from all the different sources in the universe are all merging into ourselves, particularly into the TAM within our heart.

One should, of course, always be aware of the fact that the syllable TAM itself is our mind, the nature of our mind.

So when we visualize and imagine all the good qualities within the universe merging into the TAM, in fact we are visualizing all the good qualities merging into our own mind. And if this is done with strong faith, in fact it is said that one will certainly receive all the good qualities, of long life, nourishment, and so forth.

I feel that extracting the essence from the five elements is actually a very factual practice. Whenever we get sick, or are unwell in any way it is said that it is because of the five elements being out of balance, or being not sufficient in our bodies. So when we visualize that we are receiving the essence of all five elements, in fact that in itself is the proper way to think of how we should be healthy, having the essence of the five elements in balance within ourselves.

So at this point, when we do this visualization, while we are still contemplating the visualization of the light rays going out in all the directions and then invoking all the good qualities, bringing them back and merging them into the syllable, while we are doing this visualization, then at this point we start doing the recitation of the mantra, the long mantra. We do it twenty-one times at the beginning.

Then after having done a twenty-one round of the long version of the mantra, then we begin the actual recitation of the actual mantra of Tara, which is OM TARA TUTTARE TURE SOHA, and at this point we begin counting, because if we're doing a retreat we're supposed to be doing a certain number of recitations.

If I were to relate from my own experience of doing a retreat, it is my own experience that I find it difficult to continue to focus on the visualization, and sometimes it can become too stressful for the mind. So I find it useful,

beneficial, before beginning the recitation to try to focus very attentively on the visualization as explained in the text. And when I come to the point of the recitation, because I have focused very attentively on the visualization initially, because I have imagined that I'm doing the process of invoking the good qualities from all the different directions, then I try to relax the mind a bit from the actual visualization and just contemplate on the recitation itself.

Then, after I reach about one thousand recitations, I can go back into doing the visualization, while still reciting, but focusing more on the visualization- of sending out the light from the syllable TAM, and the light radiating out to all the directions and invoking the good qualities of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the five elements, and all the riches and long life, and so forth, and bringing that back in the form of light rays, and merging them into the TAM, doing that visualization, as explained previously.

You know, I feel that after doing some recitation, one feels that, 'I've done enough work to be able to receive more blessings'. (laughter) It's like even the visualization at that point becomes stronger.

So if one finds it difficult to maintain the visualization all throughout, then, not to be too stressful, but to remember that the main point is to have a relaxed mind, and to feel the blessings being received from all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

It is mentioned that when we do any retreat practice, the sessions should be as grain is- so for example if one had committed one's self to doing a one week retreat, let's say on White Tara, then on the first and second days the sessions are more brief, relaxed. Then as one goes into the third, fourth and fifth days, then one increases the length of the sessions, and even the focus and the visualization should be stronger. Then as one comes to the end, one decreases the length, and if one finds it to be quite stressful, the

one can be more relaxed at this time.

So if one were planning to stay for two hours in each session, one begins the first day with maybe only an hour. Then on the second day one could start increasing the length of the session.

Sometimes when I do retreat I'll go into three hours each session in the middle. So then the longest in the beginning can be like two hours. So in the beginning, one hour in a session the first day, and then increasing more the second, and then eventually coming to two hours in a session. Then at the end again decreasing the time, and coming back again to one hour.

The reason why it is said to have shorter sessions in the beginning of a retreat is that if one puts so much time and energy in the beginning, one may lose interest and one may become discouraged. So the time length is said to be like a grain, and the reason why is because the top and the bottom of a grain are pointed, and the middle is thicker. So that is how the duration of the time should be, small or short in the beginning, and then more extensive in the middle, and then short again at the end.

When we come to the middle of our retreat period, then we have to become quite accustomed to visualization, and to the actual meditation itself. Then if we extend our time we don't feel as tired or stressful. Then to decrease the time as one is ending the retreat is so that one will feel enthusiastic about doing a retreat in the future.

So then, to make it brief, at the end, after one does the visualization, then one does the mantra of the Sanskrit vowels and consonants, and then after that the Vajrasattva mantra, and then the dedication.

(Translator: I think it's the last verse of the dedication that's the verse that Geshe-la was mentioning:)

I pray that, by the power of these prayers and praises,

for all beings and myself, wherever they may dwell,  
illness, demons, poverty, quarrels and wars  
may be pacified,

May the Dharma and good fortune flourish

(The first verse of the dedication, I'm sorry...):

If I see the signs of untimely death, let me straight  
away clearly see the form of Mother Tara, the wish-  
fulfilling wheel, and, crushing the might of the Lord  
of Death, quickly become a deathless vajradhara.

Then after we recite this dedication verse we can end our session. This is  
the most brief way of how to do a retreat on White Tara.

So even if one were not able to do a retreat on White Tara, to do the practice  
every morning for about half an hour, if one can do the practice and recite  
the mantra for, let's say, a thousand times each morning until one reaches a  
hundred thousand times, then that would be very beneficial in one's life,  
that would be very beneficial. And that could be done just as a practice,  
but not in a retreat form. It is similar to doing a retreat, even though it's not  
very strict. That could be done even if one is working, before going to  
work, one can do it in the morning. There is definite benefit if one is able to  
do that.

The particular sadhana which I have given tonight is a sadhana which has  
only two pages, so it's a very easy sadhana.

So I will conclude here tonight, and thank you very much, everyone. Let us  
do the dedication.

(dedication)