

Essays on Buddhist Prayer

Volume Two

By Various Teachers

Introduction

The following is an introduction to the essays I have written on Buddhist Prayer (Volume One), to articles on the subject by various teachers (Volume Two), and to the 15 volumes in this collection titled *An Ocean of Prayers*.

November 17th, 2023

At this moment in time, I will begin again.

I am sitting in the library that is across the street from my home, listening to quiet music as the struggling, suffering world goes on outside. From a safe distance, I can think clearly, and try to express what I've had in me for some time now to say.

I usually feel like I am in the middle somewhere with any project I leave off and pick up again, but here the sense of it is especially acute. I know that I have only gathered together over the years the wisdom and inspiration of those who know much more than I do, and a few comments I've written down. *Where does this begin?* and *Where does this lead to?* - are more philosophical questions than I'm interested in now, as I hope will become clear.

I am more interested in how prayer works, and what can be accomplished with it

Of course, this implies a belief system to even begin, or to sustain prayer, and this is where it gets really interesting and practical for me. If a world view is there, then much happens naturally in terms of prayer, and meditation, and caring for ourselves and others and our world.

As I have tried to describe elsewhere, so much turns on the world view that we have. One small collection of essays I was able to complete recently has the title, *Opening the Door to Pure Perception*, since this makes a great

difference, as far as what we feel we have to work with - the resources we can reach and make use of in our lives, and in the lives we care for.

The common, mundane view of our lives here has far fewer means. I have attempted then to describe the ways a person can open up to a fuller understanding of spiritual truths here.

Much has been written about prayer, but most of it, of course, is from a theistic point of view. I would have little to add to that, but the field of non theistic prayer is wide open. Not much has been said about it, which surprises me, but when I look at the life of prayer in general, and Buddhist prayer in particular, I catch a glimpse of what I can at least try to offer.

This didn't begin here of course, and it will not end with however much we may be able to study, and reflect, and pray in our lives. It will continue, in mysterious ways, vivifying, revealing, always onward leading....

There is much to be said, and one person can only do so much, I know. I was heartened to continue though this when I heard earlier today -

*It is not your obligation to complete the task,
but neither are you permitted to desist from it...*

In response to the needs of our world then,
and with great hope and faith,
I send this forth,
as prayer

An Ocean of Prayers - Contents

Essays on Buddhist Prayer - I. By Jason Espada; II. By Various Teachers

1. Selected Dedication Prayers
2. Dedication Prayers from Various Teachers {Audio}
3. Extensive Dedication Prayers from A Healing Buddha Practice
4. Prayers for the time of transition
5. A Set of Reflections and Prayers
6. A Collection of Prayers by Thang Tong Gyalpo
7. A Collection of Dedication Prayers by Lama Zopa Rinpoche
8. Paritta Recitation - A Selection of Texts {Audio}
9. Mahayana Prayers and Poetry {2012} {Audio}
10. In Praise of Avalokiteshvara
11. A Collection of Prayers to Tara
12. An Exhortation to Resolve Upon Bodhi {Audio}
13. An Anthology of Buddhist Prayer {2008}
14. A Collection of Buddhist Methods for Healing {2020}
15. Metta and Readings on the Mahayana

Essays on Buddhist Prayer, **Volume Two**, by Various Teachers (28)

I

1. From Speaking of Angels
2. From Patipada - Venerable Acariya Mun's Path of Practice
3. And the Devas Rejoiced
4. The origin of the metta teachings
5. The Origin of the Sharing of Merit in Buddhism

II

6. Why do we recite Sutras?, by Yasutani Roshi
7. A quote on chanting by Roshi Philip Kapleau
8. The Significance of Paritta Chanting
9. On reading and recitation, from the teachings of Lama Yeshe
10. A story of when Reb Dovner met the Baal Shem Tov

III

11. What does 'dedicating merit' really do?, by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Nikki Mirghafori, and Gyokei Yokoyama

12. Three Selections on the Sharing of Merit, from Sharon Salzberg, and from Transference of Merit in Ceylonese Buddhism By G. P. Malalasekera

IV

13. How Do Buddhist's Pray?, by Ringu Tulku

14. On Prayers, from the website Thubten Chodron dot com

15. From How Do Prayers Work, by the Venerable Sangye Khadro

16. From The Value of Buddhist Prayer, by Domyo Burke

17. On Divine Beings, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas , by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche

18. On Dedication Prayer by Lama Palden Drolma

19. Advice from Thrangu Rinpoche

20. From Words of Advice from Chatral Rinpoche

21. Do Buddhists Pray? - a conversation with Sarah Harding, Rev. Shohaku Okumura, Mark Unno, and The Venerable Wadawala Seelawimala

22. From the Introduction to the Visualization for Supplications, from Guru Rinpoche - His Life and Times, by Ngawang Zangpo

23. From the teachings of Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche

24. I call upon my Teachers and Spiritual Ancestors

25. A Simple Visualization

26. On Devotion and Receiving Blessings, by Various Teachers

27. Faith, Devotion, and Blessings on the Path of Liberation, by J Espada

28. On Dedication, by Tulku Thondup

From Speaking of Angels

I.

When the Buddha taught, it's often recounted that *the light of devas filled the grove*. Beings from other levels came to hear him teach the path to liberation and enlightenment. In subtle ways, they celebrate his teaching, with songs of praise and offerings of celestial flowers.

II.

There is a class of beings who respond to our spiritual efforts. At times we can feel how they rejoice even when we just have *the thought* to practice.

I remember once when I was on retreat in 2012 and I thought of studying an in-depth introduction to the Pali Sutras, and sensing what felt like happiness and encouragement from the local spirits. I don't know the extent of their powers, only that they can facilitate learning in myriad ways.

II.

The 'How-to', in part

For accessing angels and witnessing their extraordinary Activity, the first thing I think we would need is a world view that allow for such things. Even without that, at times, the working of the Divine makes itself known, but, we may also block out any awareness of such subtle and profound events.

{See [this wonderful story](#), for an inspiring example, *Frank Martin's Miraculous Journey to a New Life*}

We can be open to the thought that such beings exist, and that they communicate in many ways. This is a start, and it makes the rest, of contact,

and understanding, and being in harmony with them easier, beyond anything that can be expressed in language.

In addition to this *receptivity*, we can *take care of our physical environment, and our ethics*. When we keep these clean, the spirits are happy, and we can feel their presence and support.

Angels can come through in times of despair and disarray, but then it's a more difficult revelation. We are loved, and for the divine, for holy ones, there is no barrier to that. When we *pray* for help in times of need, we can feel the presence of what can be called the angels of comfort. When we pray for others, if our inner vision is open, we can see and feel their blessings being shared.

Celebrating all the wonderful things in this life, in particular those of a spiritual nature, puts us in accord with the divine. When we praise and rejoice in activities of good people, and of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, we join the angelic host.

We can also practice *gratitude*, and *humility*, a part of which is *deep listening* and attentiveness throughout our lives. Then we'll see more and more of what is happening in the spirit realm, woven throughout our own lives.

It may seem strange to add, but because it's so obvious we may miss it, and that is to say that if we want help in some area of our lives, *we should ask*. There is some spiritual help that comes to us in part because of our willingness. It's as if it's waiting eagerly for our assent, for our own openness, to change or to learn.

From Patipada: Venerable Ācariya Mun's Path of Practice, by Ajahn Maha Boowa

{Note: Ajahn Mun is considered the grandfather of the modern Thai Forest Tradition in Buddhism. Throughout his biography by his close disciple, Ajahn Maha Boowa, there are stories of Ajahn Mun and his disciples interacting with different classes of beings, teaching them, and at times learning from them as well. Because this biography offers a different and I believe richer world view than what is commonly accepted these days in the West, I would like to offer here a few selections. These are very much in line with the other teachings on prayer, chanting, and the recitation of the Dhamma in Buddhism, and the world view of other contemplatives.}

Mettā which is experienced as kindness and gentleness is a close and harmonious intimacy with all beings. Both those who would be enemies and all others, including all people, the Devatās, Indra, Brahma, Yama, the Yakkhas and Demons, and all throughout the three realms (Ti-loka-dhātu), and at such a time there are none that can be seen as enemies. The hearts of all the Buddhas and Arahants are full of boundless mettā for all beings and those who have mettā are always happy whether awake or asleep.

* * *

Many groups of Devatās who came to visit him (Ajahn Chob) on various occasions had preferences for different aspects of Dhamma. Some liked to be given the moral precepts (sīla) before listening to Dhamma, some wanted to listen to Dhamma straight away, some liked the higher and some the lower Samyojana Dhammas, (The Ten Fetters) but most preferred the lower group.

Some liked to hear the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, (The first discourse of the Buddha) others the Karaṇīyamettā Sutta, and yet others preferred to

listen to the Sangaha–Dhamma which is concerned with helping each other.

He said that they variously had their own peculiar preferences, each being different but they followed the wishes of the majority when many of them came. They variously liked listening to Dhamma in accordance with their tendencies of character, much as some people do.

Some liked to hear about mettā and the Brahmavihāras, others liked to hear some suttas which I had never heard of before and I could only tell them that I didn't know anything about these suttas. So they asked to hear another sutta which they liked.

He said that the Devatās loved and respected him very much and did not want him to go elsewhere. They wanted him to stay a long time with them, for they told him that while he stayed there their hearts were very peaceful.

At night they would hear the sound of his chanting and developing the Dhamma of mettā, and they were deeply affected by the Dhamma which he chanted a great deal, so that they did not want him to stop.

He said that in doing this chanting he only did it mentally and did not do it out loud such that anyone could hear it. But when the Devatās came to visit him they would ask him to chant various special suttas which made them feel happy and which they enjoyed listening to more than any other suttas. While he was chanting they listened intently and completely absorbed.

He asked them:

“How do you know when I am chanting these suttas? ”

They immediately answered saying that:

“The sound of your chanting reverberates through all the worlds and how could we not hear it?”

Dhamma is very subtle and refined, and when it is brought out and proclaimed by chanting or recitation it is bound to resonate throughout the worlds to let everyone hear it who is able to hear it in the whole Loka-dhātu.

And the Devas Rejoiced {[Audio](#)}

And when the Blessed One had set the Wheel of Dhamma in motion, the earth devas cried out, in jubilation:

Aah! At Varanasi, at the Game Refuge at Isipatana, the Blessed One has set in motion the unexcelled Wheel of Dhamma, that cannot be stopped by any contemplative, or deva, or Mara, or God, or by anyone in the cosmos!

On hearing the earth devas' rejoicing, the devas of the Four Kings' Heaven understood what they said, and also took up the cry, celebrating... and this was followed by the devas of the Thirty-three... and the Yama devas... and the Tusita devas... all the way up even to the devas of Brahma's retinue...

Rejoicing, they all proclaimed with one mighty voice,

Aah! At Varanasi, at the Game Refuge at Isipatana, the Blessed One has set in motion the unexcelled Wheel of Dhamma, that cannot be stopped by any contemplative, or deva, or Mara, or God, or by anyone in the cosmos!

Thus, this joyful song of praise travelled up even to the realm of the highest divinities, and this system of ten thousand worlds trembled, and quaked, and shook, and a boundless, sublime radiance, surpassing the glory of all the devas appeared in the world...

The origin of the metta teachings

The teachings on metta, or loving kindness in Buddhism go back to the Historical Buddha. The story of how they began goes like this:

Once there were some monks who had found a suitable place to retreat and practice meditation for a season. It was quiet, had fresh water, and some sheltered areas. As they settled in to their individual practice, the local spirits were glad they were there. In the beginning, they were happy to have the company. After a while though, the local spirits started to wonder how long the monks would stay. They started to worry the monks would take over, and so they began more and more to harass the monks. They manifested horrible smells, frightful sounds and visions. The monks did the best they could to tolerate it, but after a while they said, We can't take this any longer! In despair over losing a good place to practice they went to the Buddha to ask his advice.

The Buddha listened, thought carefully, and gave them the teaching that has been handed down to us as the Metta Sutta. It begins,

This is what should be done by those who are skilled in goodness...

The essence of this short teaching is contained in the line,

*Even as a mother protects and loves her child,
her only child,
just so should we cultivate boundless love to offer to all beings in the entire
cosmos...*

He went on to assure them that for one who practices in this way

their love will know no obstacles

In later generations, the teachings on metta that the Buddha gave that day were set to music, to be chanted, and I understand that it is considered one of the most beautiful chants in the Tradition stemming all the way from those times.

The monks took the Buddha's admonition to heart, and went back to the forest to practice, this time with the metta teaching as their companion, guide, and protection. It's said that, at first, the local spirits were again hostile, manifesting the terrible smells and sounds and appearances as before, but that after a while, they began gradually to calm down. They noticed something different about the monks this time. They could sense that the monks weren't afraid, or repulsed, or aggressive back. Instead, they were wishing them to be well and happy, safe, and at ease. They were actually praying for the happiness of all the spirits' ancestors and descendants, and for each one of them to have health and provision, comfort and joy. The feeling was so pleasant the spirits decided to support and protect the monks in turn. They made sure that while they were there they had a comfortable and quiet place, with harmonious conditions.

When the rainy season ended, the monks thought it was time to return to the larger community where the Buddha lived and taught. As soon as they began to think of this, it's said that they heard unusual sounds – it was the sound of the local spirits crying. The spirits had come to love and respect the monks so much, that they didn't want them to leave. The monks assured them that they would return, and, what's more, that they would continue to offer prayers and the energy of their metta practice for their safety, health and happiness.

It was just as the Buddha had said it would be. Metta, or pure loving kindness, cultivated and extended throughout a difficult situation has the power to transform and overcome the problem. This is true whether it is a difficult emotion in ourselves, or in a place, in a relationship, or social condition.

Over the centuries, the Buddhist teachings have been arranged in many different ways, all with the intention of making the practice of them more accessible, and more effective for people, and this is true also of the teachings on metta, or the development of loving kindness. By the time five hundred years had passed after the Buddha, the commentarial tradition in India and Sri Lanka had formulated a path of practice to cultivate metta step by step to its universal level. One begins with oneself, or whoever is easiest to have uncomplicated feelings of love for. Then one adds to that the cultivation of loving kindness and well wishing for, progressively, family and friends, those we don't know personally, those we have difficulty with, and finally all beings.

Along the way in the practice we meet everything that blocks our having such an unconditional, all embracing love: our attachments and possessiveness; anger, impatience, pride, neglect of others, laziness, and so on - but if we stay with the practice, these are gradually purified, so that our love can really manifest as needed with all people, and in all situations.

May it be this way for all of us!

The Metta Sutta

This is what should be done
by those who are skilled in goodness,
and who know the path of peace:

Let them be able and upright,
humble and not conceited,
contented and easily satisfied,
unburdened with duties
and frugal in their ways.

Peaceful and calm,
and wise and skillful,
not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
that the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: in gladness and in safety,
may all beings be at their ease.

Whatever living beings there may be,
whether they are weak or strong,
omitting none,
the great or the mighty,
medium, short or small,
the seen and the unseen,
those living near and far away,
those born and to-be-born –
May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,
or despise any being in any state.

Let none through anger or ill-will
wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
her child, her only child,
so with a boundless heart
should one cherish all living beings;

radiating kindness over the entire world,
spreading upwards to the skies,
and downwards to the depths,
outward and unbounded,
freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking,
seated or lying down,
free from drowsiness,
one should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views,
the pure-hearted one,
having clarity of vision,
being freed from all sense desires,
is not born again into this world.

The Origin of the Sharing of Merit in Buddhism, As found in the Tirokudda Sutta

Introduction

The Buddhist ritual of sharing of merits was first established with the story of King Bimbisara.

After the Buddha taught The Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dhamma to the five ascetics, they became his first disciples. Then the Buddha went to Gaya and converted the three ascetic brothers, and their one thousand followers.

Then, while proceeding to Rajagaha, King Bimbisara went to visit him with thousands of brahmins. King Bimbisara was established in the fruit of Stream-entry on that very day, and he invited the Buddha to a meal in the palace the following day.

During the alms-giving, pretas who were the departed next-of kin of King Bimbisara stood outside the walls of the palace thinking, "The king will dedicate the merits of the alms-giving to us."

However, after the alms-giving, King Bimbisara did not dedicate the merits to the pretas who were his next of kin, but instead, his mind was thinking about where to build the vihara for the Buddha. Not receiving the merits, these pretas made dreadful cries and wailings outside the palace walls in the dead of night.

The king heard these unearthly noises and became very frightened. At daybreak, the king told the Buddha about his dreadful experience and asked him about what had happened.

The Buddha explained to the king:

‘Former relatives of yours who have been reborn as pretas have been going around for an immeasurably long time, expecting to be released from their suffering.

They had expected you to dedicate the alms-giving done yesterday to them, but you did not. They were extremely distressed by this, and lamented their lost hope.’

The king said, ‘O Blessed One, would they receive the merits, if I give alms today and dedicated the merits to them?’

The Buddha said, Yes, they would.

‘Then let the the Blessed One accept my invitation of alms-giving today.’

The Blessed One consented.

During the alms-giving to the Buddha and his Order of Ariya Sangha, further strange things happened. *The Buddha, using his supernormal powers, caused the pretas from outside the walls of the palace to be clearly seen by the king.*

As the king gave the gift of water saying, ‘Let this be for my relatives!’, at that moment, lotus ponds appeared around the pretas. The pretas bathed in them, and their weariness and thirst was allayed; and their bodies became the color of gold.

The king then gave rice gruel, and both hard and soft food, and dedicated the action. All at once, the pretas had food to eat, and their faculties were refreshed.

The king gave robes and lodging and dedicated these actions, and instantly, the pretas were richly adorned, and they had well-furnished palaces to live in.

When he saw this, he king was extremely delighted;

And when the Blessed One had finished his meal, he expounded this
Tirokudda Sutta:

*Outside the walls they stand,
and at crossroads.*

*At door posts they stand,
returning to their old homes.*

*But when a meal with plentiful food and drink is served,
no one remembers them:*

Such is the kamma of living beings.

*Thus, those who feel sympathy for their passed-over relatives
give timely donations of proper food and drink-
exquisite, and clean,
thinking:*

“May this be for our relatives.

May our relatives be happy!”

*Then those who have gathered there,
the assembled shades of the relatives,
with appreciation, give their blessing
for the plentiful food and drink:*

‘May our relatives live long!

We have been honored,

and May the donors have a good reward!’-

*For in their realm, there is no farming,
no herding of cattle,
no commerce, no trading with money.*

*They live on what is given here,
hungry shades whose time here is done.*

*As water raining on a hill
flows down to the valley,
even so does what is given here
benefit those who have departed from this world.*

*As rivers full of water
fill the ocean full,
even so does what is given here
benefit those who have passed on.*

*In this way,
'He gave to me, she acted on my behalf,
these were my relatives, and companions, and friends'-
Offerings should be given for those who have passed over,
when one remembers our relations in the past.*

*For no weeping, no sorrowing
and no other lamentation
benefits those who have passed on*

*But when this offering is given,
well-placed in the Sangha,
they profit immediately,
and it works for their long-term benefit.*

*The proper duty to relatives has been shown;
Great honor has been done for the departed loved ones;
Monks have been given strength-
and the merit you have acquired is great.*

Why do we recite Sutras?, by Yasutani Roshi

A quote on chanting by Roshi Philip Kapleau

The Significance of Paritta Chanting

On reading and recitation, from the teachings of Lama Yeshe

A story of when Reb Dovner met the Baal Shem Tov

Why do we recite Sutras?, by Yasutani Roshi

Translated by Eido Tai Shimano Roshi and Robert Chotan Aitken Roshi

There are three reasons why we recite sutras. First, we recite them to make an offering to Buddhist patriarchs; second, to create a noble relationship with all beings; third, to unite these first two actions with our Buddhist training.

Our action in displaying a Buddhist image and offering it incense, flowers, candlelight, and deep bows is such an expression. The greatest delight for Buddhist patriarchs is for their followers to respect, to maintain, and to spread the teaching. Therefore, we sit before an image and recite with sincerity the sutras which they composed. In this way, our sutra recitation is the expression of our gratitude to them.

Second, Buddhist followers want to have others know about and believe and realize the noble teaching of the Buddha. In order to do this, we must read sutras as often as possible. It is necessary and important to do this to establish a relationship with many people. You may ask why, then, we may read sutras alone, or before a dead person. Such recitation has value, and I will explain it to you.

We recite sutras before others as an education of their subconscious minds. On the surface, it may seem that effectiveness of teaching is limited by the extent of understanding. So, it may be thought, if we read difficult sutras, they will have no effect. However, only people who do not understand the power and subtlety of the subconscious hold such an opinion. If you have studied only a little about the subconscious, you will know that even though you do not grasp meaning with your conscious mind, you may understand very clearly with your subconscious. Or, if you do not get any conscious impression, you may already have a subconscious impression. Moreover, you will know, if you have studied the matter, that our conscious

mind is influenced by our subconscious; indeed, that our subconscious operates absolute control over our character.

Now, reading sutras alone in a mountain temple is announcing Buddha's teaching to all the world, to all the universe. For our conscious minds, we need a radio station and a radio. However, on the subconscious level, all people in this world and all life in this universe receive perfectly the sutras recited by one person in a mountain temple, and they accept completely the doctrines of Buddhism.

Furthermore, if you know the grandeur and subtlety of the thinking process, you will realize that just thinking the sutras, without using the voice, has a great influence upon the people of the world.

Thus, whether or not others can see or hear, whether they are alive or long dead, if we recite sutras time and again with great conviction to the visible and invisible worlds, we permeate everywhere and guide many to Buddhism, saving all beings. Therefore, the recitation of sutras is very meaningful work.

I presume that you understand that the first two elements of sutra recitation are elements of Buddhist training. But I want to emphasize this point, that there is a great difference in effectiveness in both elements according to the way you recite the sutras--with great energy and single-mindedness, or half-heartedly.

At the same time, there is also a great difference in effectiveness in the third aspect of sutra recitation. This third element is this: if you recite sutras with great energy and single-mindedness frequently, then your own samadhi power will be strengthened and you will have a good chance for satori. Or, if you have already awakened, your satori will shine more brilliantly in your character and act more effectively in your everyday life. The most important attitude in reciting sutras is to recite with your whole spirit.

In conclusion, let me say that if you recite sutras with your whole heart, there will be no difference between zazen and your recitation.

Mind is unlimited. Chanting when performed egolessly has the power to penetrate visible and invisible worlds.

- Roshi Philip Kapleau

The Significance of Paritta Chanting

From Temple News, Wat Kiryvongsa Bopharam, the Peace Meditation Center, Leverett, Massachusetts, August 11th, 2015

Courtesy of Deon Seng KS Lim

Paritta chanting is the recital of some of the Sutras uttered by the Buddha in the Pali language for the blessing and protection of the devotees.

Paritta Chanting or Sutra Chanting is a well-known Buddhist practice conducted all over the world, especially in Theravada Buddhist countries where the Pali language is used for recitals. Many of these are important sutras from the basic teachings of the Buddha which were selected by His disciples. Originally, these sutras were recorded on ola leaves about two thousand years ago. Later, they were compiled into a book known as the 'Paritta Chanting Book'. The names of the original books from which these sutras were selected are the Anguttara Nikaya, Majjhima Nikaya, Digha Nikaya, Samyutta Nikaya and Kuddaka Nikaya in the Sutra Pitaka.

The sutras that Buddhists recite for protection are known as *Paritta Chanting*. Here 'protection' means shielding ourselves from various forms of evil spirits, misfortune, sickness and influence of the planetary systems as well as instilling confidence in the mind.

The vibrant sound of the chanting creates a very pleasing atmosphere in the vicinity. The rhythm of the chanting is also important. One might have noticed that when monks recite these sutras, different intonations are adopted to harmonize with different sutras intended for different quarters.

It was found very early during man's spiritual development that certain rhythms of the human voice could produce significant psychological states of peacefulness and serenity in the minds of ardent listeners.

Furthermore, intonation at certain levels would appeal to devas, whilst certain rhythms would create a good influence over lower beings like animals, snakes, or even spirits or ghosts. Therefore, a soothing and correct rhythm is an important aspect of Paritta Chanting.

The use of these rhythms is not confined to Buddhism alone. In every religion, when the followers recite their prayers by using the holy books, they follow certain rhythms. We can observe this when we listen to Quran reading by Muslims and the Veda Mantra Chanting by Hindu priests in the Sanskrit language. Some lovely chanting is also carried out by certain Christian groups, especially the Roman Catholic and Greek orthodox sects.

When the sutras are chanted, three great and powerful forces are activated. These are the forces of the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha. Buddhism is the combination of these 'Three Jewels' and when invoked together they can bring great blessing to mankind.

On reading and recitation, from the teachings of Lama Yeshe

{With reading and recitation, prayer and mantra}

With mantra... our mind's vision is positive, divine and holy, and our speech transcends ordinariness or useless conversation, becoming tranquil and healing.

When we chant the prayers we do, it's not just for the emotional sensations they might bring.

Take, for example, the lamrim prayer *The Foundation of All Good Qualities*. When we recite it, we bring to mind its essence, the three principal aspects of the path to liberation. That's what it signifies.

When we recite it, we automatically visualize its meaning, which displaces the usual garbage that normally fills our mind and brings a negative reaction. *It automatically elevates our mind.*

So prayers are not just the words or something we sing simply to experience some kind of emotional pleasure. It's possible we sometimes do that, isn't it? If we allow our minds to degenerate, we can finish up using prayers merely for the sentimental pleasure of a samsaric trip. If we lose their profound essence, they become completely devoid of meaning...

*If, instead, we recite prayers and mantras with a profound understanding of their incredible meaning, our minds can transcend their normal worldly existence and attain a state of bliss. So, such recitations are very, very useful...

When the great scholar Reb Dovber heard about the Baal Shem Tov – that all were flocking to him and many were healed from his great prayers – though he was an incredible scholar in all of Torah, he decided to go see for himself (and test him;)

As he arrived, the Baal Shem Tov told him what appeared to be simple (though very deep) fables.

He decided to leave – at midnight the Baal Shem Tov sent his attendant to ask the Maagid to come to him, which he did.

He said “You are knowledgeable in Torah, correct?” – “Yes.”

He asked his attendant to open “Eitz Chayim” (a Kabbalistic book) and he asked the Maagid to explain – the Maagid did – the Baal Shem Tov told him, “You don’t understand.”

So he explained it again, and the Baal Shem Tov said, “You don’t understand.”

So he said “If the master has another explanation, please tell me.”

So the Baal Shem Tov told him to stand, which he did, and then the Baal Shem Tov read it – and as he read it, all that it was speaking about, Holy Names of G-d, angels... all manifested!

He saw a great fire...

The Baal Shem Tov said, “Your study lacked your soul” – and then the Maagid became his disciple.

What does 'dedicating merit' really do?

Three Selections on the Sharing of Merit

What does 'dedicating merit' really do?

By Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Nikki Mirghafori, and Gyokei Yokoyama

Lion's Roar, February 25th, 2019

Question: We are encouraged to dedicate the merit of our practice to all beings. It's a beautiful idea, but what effect, if any, does it really have? And can you offer something you're not sure you even have?

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo: In traditional Buddhist countries, the concept of punya has always played an important role. Usually translated as merit or even as goodness, punya represents the positive karmic results of good intentions and actions. This belief in the power of meritorious actions is perceived as an ethical force that can be directed toward any chosen object. So people set about "making merit" and rejoicing in it; the merit is then dedicated to others and thus shared. This serves as an encouragement to perform acts of goodness such as generosity and kindness. We can also rejoice in and share the goodness we see others perform.

At the start of formal practice, we take refuge in the three jewels and then, in the Mahayana traditions, we recite the bodhisattva vow and remind ourselves that we are undertaking this practice not just for our own sake but to benefit all beings. In other words, we set our spiritual GPS to the destination of enlightenment-for-the-sake-of-all. Then, at the completion of that day's practice, we again remind ourselves of our aim by dedicating whatever goodness has been gained to the welfare and happiness of all beings- or to the whole planet and beyond. These are trainings in bodhichitta, reminders that our practice has a meaning beyond benefitting just ourselves.

Even the effort to do the practice rather than watch TV or play on the computer is a good thing, and we can feel pleased and satisfied by it, wishing to share that essential goodness with others. We can dedicate that

merit whether or not we understand the mechanics of how it all works. Just do it. So much is hidden from our rational mind. Let us retain a sense of mystery and not be narrow and materialistic. The dharma goes beyond our conceptual thinking.

This is not just a “beautiful idea” but is also practical- the world is in dire need of goodness and positive energy. Thoughts have power. Prayers and aspirations have force.

Almost everyone experiences a special atmosphere when visiting sacred places such as Bodhgaya or Assisi, despite the surface chaos or commercialism. Centuries of devotion, thoughts directed to the sacred, have created a palpable spiritual energy there. Likewise, we spontaneously feel the profound sorrow and heaviness of spirit when visiting Auschwitz or Dachau. We swim in an ocean of thought forms but, like fish in water, we do not recognize our own psychic environment.

If only we could see it, we would know that the psychic pollution surrounding this planet is far denser than the physical pollution. There is so much anger, greed, jealousy, fear, and general negativity in society, all of which is further cultivated and celebrated in the media. In this darkness, we need some light. Dedicating our positive energy helps to bring balance and joyful appreciation into a seemingly hopeless situation. Drop by drop, the water jar is filled. Therefore, through the merit of this practice, may all beings be happy and free from suffering!

Nikki Mirghafori: When I came to Buddhist practice, the concept of “dedicating merit” felt familiar from my Persian cultural upbringing in a liberal Muslim family. I grew up with regular kheyraat and savaab, meritorious acts done so that the rippling effects of their goodness would benefit deceased loved ones. I remember as a child participating in giving away food to strangers, and my grandmother’s special prayers, a kind of “merit” dedicated to her deceased brother, my uncle. Of course, such

practices are not unique to Persian culture. Many cultures around the world have rituals to dedicate positive actions in the name of the ancestors.

The Buddhist practice of dedicating merit is similar in spirit, but with two significant expansions. The primary and most important aspect is to recognize that our practice, however shoddy it might feel, is a meritorious act of goodness, not so different from other acts of generosity in the world.

It is not how calm our mind gets or how many insights arise during a practice period, but simply our intention of having tried, having sat or walked, having aligned our actions with our highest intentions, even for a minute. Even one moment of attempting to settle one's mind and heart is a moment of cultivating goodness, which in turn inclines our heart and mind toward more goodness, love, and wisdom.

And let us have humility and awe about how each little moment of goodness may percolate through the world, in the ways our thoughts and actions affect ourselves and others. So, one effect of the practice of dedicating merit is building trust that our practice is synonymous with goodness in and of itself, and the other is seeing the potential for its powerful rippling effect. It is this goodness, or merit, that we see, recognize, acknowledge, and share.

The other dimension is that this dedication practice- not keeping what's good just for ourselves and our immediate circle of loved ones- is a radical act of generosity. Dedicating merit then becomes synonymous with the practice of metta, where we are extending our goodwill and generosity of heart in ever-expanding concentric circles, starting with ourselves, benefactors, dear friends, and extending to neutral relationships, difficult ones, and finally, all beings everywhere. Training and expanding our heart in generosity and goodwill is another effect of the practice of dedicating merit.

At some point along the arc of our maturity as practitioners, our practice becomes indistinguishable from our life; our practice becomes our life, and our life becomes our practice. Consider what it would be like to live your life as an offering to all beings? What if, at the end of the day, every day, you dedicate—freely offering up for the benefit of all beings everywhere—all the merit or goodness generated from living your one and only precious life?

Gyokei Yokoyama: Eko, or transfer of merit (Skt., *parinamana*), is a Buddhist practice to benefit others through our thoughts and actions. We offer merit to sentient beings, deities, devas, and even ghosts (the ghosts, who might otherwise haunt us, may, through merit, become our guardians). This reflects the Buddhist teaching that buddhanature is true in all beings, beyond any bias, discrimination, or stereotype.

Traditionally, merit is also offered to the dead. While the intention is firm in our mind, we offer sweets, tea, and various other items. There is no belief that these items can be transferred to the next life, in the same way that we say, “You can’t take it with you.” But we say the merit, which arises from sincere intentions, can be transferred. It’s said that chanting a sutra or offering incense wholeheartedly, with a genuine intention, brings about merit and helps the dead move further toward enlightenment.

But what effect, if any, does this really have? We can see how it works by looking to our own experience.

Occasionally, I see people throw trash out of car windows or onto the sidewalk while walking. The consequence of that action is immediately visible, right in front of us; the effect of not littering, even if we don’t consciously notice it in the same way, is visible as well. Beyond the visible, beyond what we see on the streets, are the effects on people’s minds, how litter or its absence changes the atmosphere, which in turn changes us. And beyond that, in the realm of intention, are effects that we will never know through our senses or consciousness.

In my home village, people work in the rice fields, and as they do, they hear the sound of the temple bell in the distance. They say that when the sound of the bell reaches their ears, they feel peaceful. The sound literally resonates in their minds, and as it does, they feel they are truly working together. Anyone can have an experience like this.

In the meditation hall, sitting silently or chanting a sutra with no one else around, it's natural to wonder what effect there might be, if any. We may doubt that we are inspiring the world, or making any change, or offering anything at all. But it's the same as the bell. There's no difference.

Ultimately, in Buddhist practice, there is no separation between giver, receiver, and gift. Whatever we do, whatever we offer, we are not practicing for sentient beings. We are practicing with sentient beings as sentient beings. It's infinitely interdependent.

Three Selections on the Sharing of Merit

From Sharon Salzburg

I

Merit is a concept that says every time we turn our mind toward the good, there is an energy created. Every act of generosity and kindness, including meditation, generates positive energy. It's believed that the force of that energy is a conduit to those who have died. In traditional cultures like Burma, when somebody dies, the family will come to the monastery and feed the meditators, then dedicate the merit of this gift to the person who has died. They share the merit of that action.

Once a friend of mine died before I went to sit a retreat. I told the teacher this on the first day and he said, "Well, now you'll have to do the retreat for both of you." So every night I did a sharing of the merit. You don't have to have spectacular meditations, just the fact that you even sat down to do it generates merit. It's aligning yourself with an energy of goodness. Throughout the retreat, I would dedicate my meditations to him and to all beings everywhere.

Just like with the metta meditation, you start with people who have helped you in some way. You say, "May so and so be happy. May they be peaceful." Then you move to those who have died, those who are suffering, and then you include all beings everywhere. You can create your own progression, whatever seems right.

II.

On Sharing Merit, from the retreat talk titled, Radical Joy, by Sharon Salzberg

When we turn our mind towards the good, when we travel to get here, when we're willing to take risks, when we explore, when we're kind, when we're generous, when we're restrained...

When we've practiced meditation, and we start over, and over, and over again-

that's considered to have a moral force, that's like an energy, or a power, and we delight in that,

in goodness, and in the capacity of the human heart to turn towards it;

We take delight in it, and then we dedicate it- that force, that energy to the welfare, and the happiness of others.

Just *feel*, within yourself, some sense of that kind of delight- that you came here, that you're open, you're interested, you're *willing* to begin again, and begin again...

We turn our mind to a feeling of possibility...

You can feel that fill you...

and we can dedicate it,

we can offer this power, this strength, this sense of merit, this joy...

The Transference of Merit, from the Tirokudda Kanda

From "Transference of Merit" in Ceylonese Buddhism By G. P. Malalasekera, *Philosophy East and West*, V. 17 (1967) pp. 85-90

Every good deed produces "merit" which accumulates to the "credit" of the doer...The method of transference (of merit) is quite simple. The doer of the good deed has merely to wish that the merit he had thereby gained should accrue to someone in particular, if he so wishes, or to "all beings." The wish may be purely mental or it may be accompanied by an expression in words. This could be done with or without the particular beneficiary being aware of it.

The classic example of this transference of merit, etc., is a story connected with Bimbisaara, king of Raajagaha, a contemporary of the Buddha and a great patron of Buddhism during his lifetime. It is said that the king once invited the Buddha and a retinue of monks to his palace for a meal. At the conclusion of the meal, there was heard a great din outside. The Buddha revealed that it was caused by some of Bimbisaara's kinsmen who, after their death, had been born as petas (evil spirits) and were suffering pangs of hunger and thirst.

He told the king that it would be of no use to give them food or drink because, on account of their evil deeds, they could not partake of such things. But, said the Buddha, if the merit the king had gained by giving food to holy men were to be transferred to his departed kinsmen, by virtue of the merit so acquired, they would enjoy the fruits thereof and be able to satisfy their needs. This the king did and the result was immediate. The erstwhile petas now became happy beings and they made known their gratitude to the king in no uncertain terms.

The Buddha went on to say that the greatest boon one could confer on one's dead ancestors was to perform "acts of merit" and transfer to them the

merit so acquired. This is the theme of the well-known Tiroku.d.da Sutta which the Buddha preached on that occasion.

Here the Buddha says, among other things:

Those who are compassionate towards their deceased relatives give, on occasion, as alms (to holy men) pure, palatable and suitable solid and liquid food, saying, "May the merit thus acquired be for the comfort and happiness of our deceased relatives." And they (the relatives) who receive the merits of almsgiving wish thus: "May our relatives, from whom we have received this boon, live long." Those who give also receive the fruits of their deed....

(In Ceylon) The dead are always remembered when any good deed is done and more specially so on occasions connected with their lives, e.g., their birth or death anniversaries.

On such occasions, there is a ritual which is generally followed. The transferor pours water from a jug or other similar vessel into a receptacle, while repeating a Pali formula which has been translated as follows:

As rivers, when full, must flow
 And reach and fill the distant main;
 So indeed what is given here
 Will reach and bless the spirits there.
 As water poured on mountain top
 Must soon descend and fill the plain,
 So indeed what is given here
 Will reach and bless the spirits there.

How Do Buddhists Pray?, and from Daring Steps, by Ringu Tulku Rinpoche

From How Do Prayers Work

From The Value of Buddhist Prayer, by Domyo Burke

On Divine Beings, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas , by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche

On Dedication Prayer by Lama Palden Drolma

Advice from Thrangu Rinpoche

From Words of Advice from Chatral Rinpoche

Do Buddhists Pray?

How Do Buddhists Pray? by Ringu Tulku Rinpoche

People often ask, how do the Buddhists pray? Who do you pray to? Actually, most of the time, what Buddhists do is what can be called as prayers. It's not really only prayers, it's what we call sadhanas, which is kind of going through how to do the meditation, and then doing the meditation at the same time. But, there's also prayers in Buddhism.

There are two things, one is to whom you pray and another is for what you pray.

The first is that Buddhists don't think about a creator but they have Buddhas and enlightened beings that anybody who develops their wisdom, compassion, and all their positive qualities, they can become Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and they have the capacity not only to help themselves become free from sufferings and the problems of the samsara but they can also help others to do that.

Therefore, when we pray to them it's like seeking help. When we seek help from somebody, we need to seek help from somebody who is able to give help and who is above that problem and that difficulty.

So we pray to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and because of their wisdom and compassion we seek their help, their blessings but at the same, we also want to learn from their way of doing things and their footsteps so that we can also become like them. It's not only seeking help and positive influence from them but also a willingness to tread in their footsteps.

When we pray there is the other aspect of prayer is, we pray for what?

For Buddhists that's very important, and actually more important. We pray not only for something that's good for me, or get rid of some problems for me just now.

We always start to pray with keeping all the sentient beings in mind and (pray) for the liberation of all sentient beings from any kind of suffering.

Then (we pray) for the well being of the people of this world, and then for the welfare of the people in my own country, then slowly down and down to my little community, and then my family, my friends and then myself.

Whatever I wish for, I pray for that. And that's aspiration, what I really wish and what I aspire to, that I try to express. I kind of make a statement of what is it I wish to achieve, now and in the long run.

But then in Buddhism, just making a prayer is not enough. There needs to be a support for that prayer with some good deeds, because from a Buddhist point of view if you make a prayer but you don't do any positive deed to support that then that prayer would not happen, but if you do something positive, some positive accumulation, some positive action and then make the prayer, then by the power of that positive action, positive karma, then it is more likely that this prayer would also happen.

So, therefore, all these (aspects), when we make a prayer in Buddhism, it has to go with certain positive actions.

Most of the time we have The Seven Branch Prayer practice which is making these positive actions.

These (positive actions) are:

Making prostrations to enlightened beings

Making offerings and giving to everybody

Purification: we purify our own negative deeds

Rejoicing in the good things and positive deeds people have done

Requesting for teachers, requesting for guidance to make people more free from darkness and ignorance.

Asking great beings to be and stay with us for longer, and to appreciate good beings and great people.

and,

Then whatever positive deeds that we have done, to share it with everybody, to dedicate the (positive) result for other beings and (for) larger and greater causes.

These kinds of actions are supposed to bring positive accumulations of positive actions. This will cause the prayers to get a positive result.

So, therefore, these three things: pray to great beings, to enlightened beings. Then pray for the goodness for the benefit of more people, immeasurable people equally with compassion. And then do some positive things in order that this prayer will have some support.

These three things, that's the Buddhist way of doing prayers."

From the Buddhist point of view, praying is very important. The reason for this is expressed in two lines: "All phenomena are cause and effect, so everything depends on firm aspiration." Everything is interdependent. Whatever occurs is an effect that arose from causes and conditions. At the same time, it constitutes a new cause which gives rise to another effect. Due to interrelatedness, anything can happen once the right conditions are there, no matter how small they may be.

Praying works on this basis. When we develop a strong intention and make a vast and genuine wish, a sincere and heartfelt prayer, this can snowball and eventually result in something that is truly meaningful and great. Our frame of mind and our intention precede and dominate every action we take. Everything depends on the way we direct our mind; everything we experience depends on our motivation. When our mind moves in the right direction, it can totally reform our lives. Since a prayer is the expression of a very deep and strong intention, it can radically change our course of action.

- From Daring Steps, by Ringu Tulku

On Prayers

From the website Thubten Chodron dot com

Prayers are ways of guiding our thoughts and energy in a certain direction; they are a technique in helping us transform our mind. By repeatedly thinking of the meaning of what we are saying or reading, we train and familiarize ourselves in a way of regarding and relating to ourselves and others. The testing ground that shows us which qualities are firm within us and which ones still need to be developed is our daily life with all its various activities. Thus for a person dedicated to developing his or her Buddha potential, prayers and the activities of daily life complement each other.

From How Do Prayers Work, by the Venerable Sangye Khadro

It's always really important, if we do engage in things like prayers, on behalf of others, or on behalf of ourself, that we *compliment this* with actual practice.

So, in volume two, of Approaching the Buddhist Path, by the Dalai Lama, in a section on prayers and rituals, His Holiness talks about the need to practice sincerely, *in addition* to asking Buddhas and Gurus to pray for us.

He says that,

Bodhisattvas make many prayers and aspirations, but then they strive to accomplish their aspirations, and that we should be like them, and we should think about what causes will accomplish our prayers. If we create those causes, our prayers will bear fruit, and we will be receptive to the inspiration of the Three Jewels.

When we request spiritual mentors or monastics to pray for us, we should, from our side, refrain from nonvirtuous behavior, and act constructively. That way their prayers can be effective. The actualization of virtuous prayers and aspirations is *a cooperative effort*: prayers are made, we engage in virtuous actions, and the Three Jewels send their inspiration.

The Buddha says,

*Buddhas do not wash away negativities with water,
clear away beings' dukkha with their hands,
or transfer their realizations to other beings:
they liberate by teaching the truth of reality.*

So although it's good to make prayers, or ask our teachers, or the Sangha to also make prayers for those who are in need of help, but, don't leave it at

that. Also insure that you practice, that you live ethically, engage in spiritual practice as much as you can, and try to encourage others to do the same, especially those that we're praying for. That's the way to ensure that the prayers are more likely to come about, to bring success.

From The Value of Buddhist Prayer, by Domyo Burke

The Buddha said, “these five things are not to be obtained by reason of prayers or wishes. If they were to be obtained by reason of prayers or wishes, who here would lack them?”[i] Instead, disciples of Buddhism should “follow the path of practice leading to” long life, beauty, happiness, status, and rebirth in heaven.

That is, you study and learn what actions of body, speech, and mind actually lead to the results you want, and then you do them.

Other Buddhist teachings describe such fruitful and positive actions, such as practicing mindfulness, behaving morally, and acting with truthfulness and generosity.

In summary, then, the foundational Buddhist teaching on prayer is that it is ineffective (if the good things in life could be obtained by prayers or wishes, who would lack them?) – at least, ineffective compared with the results of actual practice.

Three Reasons Buddhists Pray

And yet, from the beginning, Buddhists have engaged in prayer and devotional rituals. Why would a Buddhist pray, if they aren’t looking to a God, or gods, for deliverance?

There are difference ways to parse out this explanation, but I see there being three reasons Buddhists pray. I’ll briefly list them here, and then go into more detail about each one:

A Buddhist may pray because they believe in God, gods, spirits, or other supernatural forces, and is praying to them for support, guidance, to express gratitude, or any the usual reasons people pray.

As I mentioned earlier, this isn't incompatible with Buddhism as long as you also try to act in ways that will help bring about the result you're seeking.

A Buddhist may believe in supernatural beings or forces external to the Buddhist tradition (for example, someone may be Christian as well as Buddhist), or they may elevate and externalize certain Buddhist figures, such as bodhisattvas, and relate to them – more or less – as deities.

A Buddhist may pray to express reverence or gratitude for, or devotion to, what they consider sacred.

While “sacred” often describes something associated with God, it can also mean “entitled to veneration or religious respect,” or “regarded with reverence.” Reverence, in turn, means “deep respect tinged with awe.”

Buddhists have been encouraged from the beginning to cultivate reverence for the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Such reverence, enacted through prayer or ritual, is believed to benefit the person praying, as opposed to being something the object of the prayer demands or relies on.

For example, cultivating reverence can increase your confidence in the Buddhist path, promote humility, and challenge self-attachment, among other things.

A Buddhist may pray to obtain a positive result of some kind, for self or other.

This can include *spiritual results* such as peace of mind, moral strength, the ability to concentrate, or eventual enlightenment.

Some Buddhists also pray *for protection* from illness and calamity, *and for positive worldly benefits*.

If a Buddhist doesn't believe in God or in other supernatural beings, how do think they think these prayers might be answered? There are two answers to this: First, many Buddhists see things like truth, compassion, Buddhist practice, moral restraint, and even sound as having their own spiritual power.

The exact mechanism by which these forces bring about a particular result may be less straightforward than a powerful deity hearing and responding to a prayer, but that doesn't make a big difference to the Buddhist's experience of prayer.

Second, formulating and expressing the intention behind a prayer can have a powerfully transformative effect on us. Changes in our thoughts and actions that seem impossible through sheer force of will can suddenly become possible as a result of prayer, even for the skeptic.

Basically, human beings come in an almost infinite variety of shapes and flavors. Some of us are naturally skeptical, and require material or scientific proof before we believe something. Or, at the very least, we need an undeniable, personal experience of something first – and even then, we may be inclined to question it. Others of us naturally come to faith, and the existence of God, gods, or other supernatural beings seems perfectly self-evident to us – or at least something we deeply hope is true.

When a faithful person embraces Buddhism, they may hold on to the God, gods, or spirits of their native religion or their culture. They also find ready-made objects of devotion in Buddhism. Clearly, the inclination toward belief in supernatural forces and beings was present in early Buddhists.

The Buddha himself instructed his followers to enshrine his relics (physical remains and other personal items) in stupas, and to enact reverential rituals around them.[vi] It was only a slight leap from that to the conviction of

early Buddhists that the remains of Shakyamuni had real power, and that proximity to them could have beneficial effects.

Before long, some Buddhists started to conceive of Shakyamuni Buddha as continuing to exist as a sort of cosmic principle (too pervasive and profound to be ended by a human death). Subsequently, some Buddhists conceived of additional buddhas (Shakyamuni was just one in a continuing series of perfectly enlightened, benevolent teachers, manifesting the universal possibility of spiritual awakening).

Before long, in Mahayana Buddhism, archetypal bodhisattvas were created, complete with images, iconography, and mythological stories. Previously, a bodhisattva was simply an ideal of an incredibly diligent Buddhist practitioner who vowed to attain complete buddhahood over the course of many lifetimes of difficult practice.

Eventually, archetypal bodhisattvas came to symbolize and embody certain Buddhist ideals such as wisdom (Manjushri bodhisattva), compassion (Avalokiteshvara bodhisattva), and skillful action (Samantabhadra bodhisattva). People painted images and created sculptures of these beings, enshrined them on altars, and prayed to them.

While it's certainly possible to regard these bodhisattva archetypes as merely symbolic or metaphorical, there's no denying many, many Buddhists throughout the centuries have related to them as beings akin to deities. In terms of sheer numbers, there have probably been – and still are – more Buddhists who pray to buddhas or bodhisattvas for real results in the world than there have been Buddhists who practice Buddhism as conscious atheists or agnostics.

Prayer to obtain some kind of positive result for self or other

As I mentioned earlier, there are two types of prayers that fit in this category:

Aid-seeking prayer in order to affect the outcomes of physical or external events, such prayers to avert disasters, overcome illness, or have good fortune.

Aid-seeking prayer to gradually transform our own practice, experience, or behavior

First I want to talk about prayers to influence physical or external events.

What's of interest here is Buddhist prayer to produce tangible results – such as recovery from an illness, or plentiful rain for crops – when it's more or less independent of any theistic beliefs.

Some proportion of Buddhists have engaged in such prayer since the beginnings of Buddhism over 2,500 years ago. As I mentioned in the last episode, the Buddha gave instructions for how his remains were to be enshrined in burial mounds so the faithful could visit them and pay respects.

Early on, these mounds, or stupas, were perceived by many as having great spiritual power. Some felt that simply being in proximity to the Buddha's relics could have positive effects on their spiritual practice, health, or well-being, and saying a prayer for positive results at a stupa just might make those results more likely.

In addition, there are a couple of places in the Pali Canon where the Buddha recommends saying aloud particular verses in particular circumstances, and when people do so, there are positive effects.

For example, in the Angulimala Sutta, the disciple Angulimala is troubled by the sight of a woman struggling with a breech birth. The Buddha instructs Angulimala to go to the woman and say,

Sister, since I was born in the noble birth [that is, got ordained as a Buddhist monk], I do not recall intentionally killing a living being. Through this truth may there be wellbeing for you, wellbeing for your fetus.

After this statement, the Pali Canon says,

there was wellbeing for the woman, [and] wellbeing for her fetus.

Another Pali Canon sutta (Atanatiya Sutta) recounts how the deities of the four directions (a.k.a. the four great kings) gave the Buddha a chant for protection against various supernatural beings who might wish him or his monks harm.

The Buddha then says to his monks,

Learn by heart, monks, the Atanata protection, constantly make use of it, bear it in mind. This Atanata protection, monks, pertains to your welfare, and by virtue of it, monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen may live at ease, guarded, protected, and unharmed...

Aid-Seeking Prayers in All Types of Buddhism

Over the millennia, in all the places Buddhism spread – including southeast Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and now the West – Buddhists have prayed for the well-being of people who have died and those who are suffering for illness or other difficulties. They have prayed for protection from misfortune and disaster, as well as for positive results like worldly success and long life. And it's not just lay people who have done this – monastics have actively engaged in the practice as well, in all lineages and sects of Buddhism.

My own Soto Zen tradition has a rich tradition of prayers and rituals done for positive results. According to Duncan Williams' book on the subject, *The Other Side of Zen*, in Tokugawa Japan, Soto Zen monks regularly performed

prayers and rituals for the benefit of the dead, faith healing, and the creation of talismans for protection. Even in my own Zen center, we chant Buddhist scriptures and then dedicate whatever merit is generated by doing to so anyone who is in difficulty. This is one of the passages we chant:

May the merit of [our practice] awaken the heart of compassion and understanding all over the world, and thereby relieve suffering and ignorance. We pray that all beings may prosper and all misfortune cease.

Just as there's a law of gravity, there are laws of moral causation. Things like truth, love, and compassion are seen as having their own spiritual power. Aspiration, moral restraint, and self-discipline have positive effects not just on ourselves but on the people and the world around us. It's possible to generate positive spiritual energy through beneficial practices that help us align with the universal order and make our lives go more smoothly. Prayer is one such practice.

It's important to note that most Buddhists who engage in prayers for positive physical or external results don't think too much about the mechanics of how such prayers might end up having an effect.

While I spoke earlier about generating positive spiritual energy and aligning with the universal order, for the most part Buddhists remain agnostic about the details – as opposed to developing elaborate theories or practices related to what spiritual energy is composed of, or how it can be perceived or harnessed, or how it's affected by diet or the stars. That's not to say individual Buddhists or even sects haven't speculated about such things, but in general such matters have remained peripheral in Buddhism.

What's believed to make a Buddhist prayer effective is the state of the prayer's mind and heart. Ideally, a prayer for oneself is made with humility, and prayer for the benefit of others is made with sincere generosity instead of sneaky self-interest.

The power of any offering or prayer is primarily increased not through cleverness or the details of ritual, but by it being performed by someone with a calm mind, spiritual insight, a spirit of renunciation, moral purity, and self-discipline – and these are virtues obtained through Buddhist practice.

Even admiration of these virtues has merit, so many Buddhists who would never brag about their own practice of Buddhism seek to increase the efficacy of their aid-seeking prayers by supporting Buddhist institutions and monastics, offering devotional prayers, or by asking ordained Buddhists to pray on their behalf.

Buddhist prayer for positive results, focusing on prayer for personal transformation

Prayer is about a direction we want to go. So, how do we go about Buddhist prayer for personal transformation? First, we conceive of what it is we deeply desire. It might be health, peace of mind, spiritual insight, equanimity, or freedom from addiction.

We call what we desire to mind, perhaps even imagining what it might look or feel like if that desire was fulfilled, and connect with the part of us that sincerely longs for that outcome. Then we acknowledge our wish while admitting to ourselves we are limited in our ability to directly bring it about through force of will.

Typically, in Buddhist prayer, we say something (silently or out loud), starting with the words, “May I.” For example, “May I be free from fear or anxiety.” Or, “May I be mindful and appreciative of my life.”

Humble but determined, we open up to the mystery of our lives and trust our prayer to have some effect...

On Divine Beings, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche

Question: We pray to the deities {here translated as the Bodhisattva Divinities} and ask them for assistance. Do these {Divinities or Celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas} exist as beings external to us? How does this practice work?

Rinpoche: According to the Vajrayana teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni, Guru Padmasambhava, and other great masters, the Celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas {Quan Yin, Tara, Avalokiteshvara}, are living Buddhas, even though we do not see them on the level of our dualistic perceptions.

There are different Buddhas living on different levels. Some are in Purelands and some are in different universes. These Purelands have different names, such as the Pureland of Akanistha, which is the Pureland beyond duality.

When you visualize and pray to a Buddha, the visualization and prayer are conceptions generated by your mind, but there is a living Buddha as well. This means that through the power of your mind in meditation, you invoke that living Buddha's energy and blessings.

Your visualization is like a photograph or a map. A photograph of a person is not the person; a map of a country is not the country, but there is an actual person and an actual country. The photograph helps you identify or remember the person, and the map shows you how to locate places within the country.

Similarly, what you are visualizing and praying to is not the actual Buddha, but through your visualization and prayer, you receive the energy and blessings of the actual Buddha.

- From The Nature of Mind, pages 115 and 116

In dedicating our meditation to ease the suffering of all beings, we engage in an act of radical imagination. Our radical imagining is that all beings are free, at peace, and awakened. Imagining this stretches our minds and creates the possibility for it to actually happen, because if we cannot imagine something, it's nearly impossible to actualize it.

In this radical imagining, our vision includes everyone equally in our love. This develops our generosity, loving-kindness, and commitment to the equality of beings. This kind of beneficence does not condone anyone's destructive actions. Rather it looks toward the possibility of liberating and transforming the ignorance that drives people's destructive actions.

- Lama Palden Drolma

Advice from Thrangu Rinpoche

On dealing with specific problems

...by specifically directing the intention of your practice to your biggest problem, the Dharma becomes an effective remedy for your kleshas, and your kleshas will weaken over time.

When you have discovered which klesha (afflictive emotion, problem, or difficulty) is the strongest, you dedicate your practice to its amelioration.

For example, if you are meditating on the four reminders, such as the difficulty of acquiring a precious human existence, you think, "I am doing the meditation in order to abandon such and such klesha."

Or if you are practicing the uncommon preliminaries, such as the refuge and bodhichitta practice, the Vajrasattva practice, mandala practice, or guru yoga, then you think, "I am doing this in order to tame this klesha that afflicts my mind."

This is especially effective in the Vajrasattva practice, wherein you can visualize the ambrosia coming from his heart and entering the top of your head to purify you and think: "Such and such klesha is being purified."

Thus, by specifically directing the intention of your practice to your biggest problem, the Dharma becomes an effective remedy for your kleshas, and your kleshas will weaken over time.

- From Creation and Completion

From Words of Advice from Chatral Rinpoche

Spoken at the Nyingma Monlam, Bodh Gaya, India, 1998

During this degenerate age in the outer world, there are many natural disasters due to the upsetting of the four elements. Also, demonic forces come with their many weapons to incite the fighting of wars. All of those forces have caused the world to come to ruin and led all to tremble with fear - so terrified that their hair stands up on end. Still, the demonic forces find it necessary to come up with many new types of weapons. If we were called on to confront them, there's no way we Dharma practitioners could defeat them. That's why we make supplication prayers to the Three Jewels, do the aspiration prayers, the offering prayers and the prayers of invocation. We are responsible for those activities. This is what I urge you to do. So at this great gathering, please think about the pacification of all these forces.

- From Compassionate Action

Do Buddhists Pray?

By the Lion's Roar Staff, March 1st, 2003

A panel discussion with Mark Unno, Rev. Shohaku Okumura, Sarah Harding and Bhante Madawala Seelawimala on Buddhist prayer.

In the movie *Oh God, God*, played by an infinitely wry George Burns, appears to a grocery clerk and delivers a message to mankind. The grocery clerk, played by John Denver, has many conversations with God and at the end of the movie God says that his message has been delivered and he will be going now. The clerk says, "Can we still talk again sometimes?" And God in the form of George Burns says, "I'll make you a deal: you talk. I'll listen."

This is the Judeo-Christian concept of prayer, a one-sided conversation with God. Since Buddhists don't believe in God, in what sense is it possible for Buddhists to pray? That is the question this issue's panel undertakes to answer.

Buddhists do not bow their heads and talk to the buddhas, but they do a great deal of chanting that might be prayers. They chant vows, aspirations and offerings. If these vows were uttered as promises to a buddha, perhaps these would be instances of prayer. As you will see, our Theravadin panelist is not eager to call vows "prayers," because he does not believe there is any god listening.

A vow is not really a promise to a buddha, for if the vow is violated, no buddha takes offense. If there is any punishment for breaking vows, it comes from one's own karma rather than an offended deity.

Mahayana Buddhism, with its bodhisattvas and compassionate cosmic buddhas, may be different, for here it does really seem as if somebody is listening. We find chants in which one makes offerings to the buddhas and

bodhisattvas, takes vows before them, confesses sins to them and asks them for forgiveness, blessings and teachings.

Are these prayers? Are there really buddhas to receive the offerings, hear the requests, and send back blessings? Our panelists have very specific opinions about this, with the emphasis on absolute reality.

There are two forms of Buddhism in China and Japan in which prayer seems to play a big part- Japanese tantra, known as Shingon, and Pure Land Buddhism. Pure Land adherents are famous for praying to the cosmic Buddha of Compassion, Amitabha, or as he is called in Japanese, Amida Butsu.

Amida has taken a vow to help sentient beings in countless ways when they call upon him. Disciples count on Amida to keep his vow and deliver them from misfortune. Thus they rely not on their own power, but on Amida's power as a buddha. This distinction between self power and other power is important in the Pure Land schools.

In the present dark age one may have to rely on the power of Amida rather than one's own tiny karmic store. At least, this is what one always hears about Pure Land Buddhism. Our panelists reflect subtler levels of interpretation of this key pair of terms.

The same may be said for both Japanese and Tibetan tantra. Tantrikas pray for many of the same things as other Mahayanists, but they are also famous for asking for a descent of blessings from the gurus of the past who, like Amitabha, seem to be an other power, a saving grace.

Here too there is a subtle understanding that may replace the literal one and we can ask once more, when a tantric disciple prays to the ancient gurus, need we think there is actually somebody listening? When blessings descend, do they really come from them, or from us?

In this regard Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche often quoted a movie he had seen in which a man said, “I think I am God, for whenever I pray, I find I am talking to myself.”

- Robin Kornman

Buddhadharma: Perhaps we could begin our discussion of the role of prayer in Buddhism by considering the Pure Land tradition, which is renowned for supplicating or invoking what it calls “other power.”

Mark Unno: One of the primary practices of the Pure Land tradition is intoning the name of Amida Buddha. In the Shin school, we say *Namu Amida Butsu*, which roughly translates as “I take refuge in Amida Buddha,” or “I entrust myself to Amida Buddha.”

Saying this name is understood as an act of taking refuge, or entrusting. This concept of entrusting, known in Japanese as *shinjin*, is widely regarded as a key to the Shin religious experience. *Shinjin* is often rendered in English as “true entrusting.” Understanding true entrusting can be helpful for understanding the nature of supplication or devotion in this tradition.

On the one hand, *shinjin* means trusting oneself to the Buddha Amida, through saying the name. On the other hand, true entrusting is an expression of the practitioner’s truest, deepest nature. For that reason, one of the primary teachers in the Shin tradition, Shinran, taught that true entrusting is also none other than one’s own buddhanature. The force of true entrusting is the nature of Amida Buddha itself, something beyond the merely human, and it is one’s true nature.

The Shin tradition is sometimes considered to be very individually oriented- the perception is that the individual seeks salvation in Amida Buddha. Actually, the religious significance of saying the name and of true entrusting is to open up or partake of the vow of Amida Buddha- originally

made at the time of being a bodhisattva- to bring all beings to enlightenment and liberation.

Buddhadharma: Aside from representing one's true nature, does Amida Buddha offer assistance to the practitioner?

Mark Unno: On the philosophical level, what it really offers is the vow to bring all beings to liberation or enlightenment. If one wants to address what actually happens in individuals' lives, one will find that followers of the tradition supplicate for a variety of goals that may or may not be addressed by the deeper philosophical understanding I described.

There are people, for example, who will invoke the name *Namu Amida Butsu* in the hope of fulfilling all the usual human hopes and desires, such as health, wealth, and in pre-modern times, successful crops. Just as one might find in any tradition, not all followers have necessarily attained the philosophical understanding of devotion to Amida Buddha.

People may supplicate for the fulfillment of various needs, and the Shin tradition does not deny these needs. Every human being has desires. Whether we express them in an explicit form of practice or not, at some level we are hoping- and in a sense praying- that we and others, especially those who are close to us, are healthy, that we can pay our bills, and so forth. The Shin tradition does not deny this. In fact, it addresses this quite specifically.

The story of Amida Buddha, and the story of the Pure Lands, is a story of a world in which *all* levels of suffering are addressed. On the one hand, there are ordinary human needs and they are included in the specific vows of Amida Buddha- vows for a world in which there is no illness, a world in which everyone has enough food, a world in which everyone is liberated from all kinds of suffering. But ultimately, all these conditions can only truly come to fruition by conforming to the vow to liberate all beings.

It is better to illustrate this than to explain it philosophically. Consider a community of people who want to create a wonderful place to live and they all share this same desire. They will achieve all their ends- including financial stability, education, medical needs- only if there is the right spirit of cooperation, of interdependence, of mutual awareness. So even though many people wish for the fulfillment of ordinary desires, ultimately we can only achieve them with the right spirit.

The Shin tradition addresses all levels of human needs, and I sense that all of the other traditions also address all of these issues. Such ordinary desires are part of our human experience. The tradition does not say, "You must not wish for good health; you must not wish for long life." We understand these wishes as part of everyone's life. Yet, as our awareness deepens, perhaps we can come to a deeper, truer understanding of our nature.

Buddhadharma: Reverend Okumura, in the Zen tradition there doesn't seem to be much reference to prayer. Are there practices of prayer, devotion or supplication in Zen?

Reverend Shohaku Okumura: Many think of Zen in opposition to Shin or Pure Land Buddhism. People sometimes think of Zen as a "self power" practice. I think, however, we must be very careful about the meaning of "other power" and "self power." As Dogen Zenji said, "To study the Buddha way is to study the self." But he also said, "To study the self is to forget the self." Dogen called our practice of meditation *shikantaza*, which means "just sitting." This "just sitting" is actually the way we study the self, but this is also the way we forget the self.

This self is not really the self as an individual, which is separate from others or from other power. When we sit, we sit on the ground that is beyond the dichotomy of self and other. In that sense, our sitting practice is a prayer to give up the self and to put our entire being on the ground of interdependent origination.

We see ourselves as individuals separate from the other, based on a distorted belief or assumption. Then we sit on the cushion and we just sit, with an upright posture and our eyes open. We don't use any visualization or mantra or even counting or watching breaths. We merely sit. In that way, the self can give up- we can put more emphasis on reality rather than on this fixed individual self. In that sense, this is a prayer. It does not mean that the self prays to the other for some benefit, but rather we place our entire being on the basis of interdependent origination. That is an essential meaning of prayer in Buddhism.

Buddhadharma: Who or what is it a prayer *to*, then?

Reverend Okumura: We would have to say it is to the self-existing, but this self is not the self that is opposed to other.

Mark Unno: This way of thinking is very resonant with the sense of "other power" in the Shin tradition. The "self power" is considered illusory because it is based on the ego, which doesn't exist as an entity. "Other power" in that sense means *other than ego*. One's true nature is the nature of Amida Buddha, which is none other than the universe itself. When one speaks of one's own true nature, that nature is not separate from other natures.

In our daily lives, however, we are usually not aware of our own nature at that level. Rather, we must see and recognize and grapple with the karmic self, the delusory self. In talking about human beings, therefore, the Shin tradition generally focuses on the karmically problematic self. But ultimately the deepest nature of the self is none other than Amida Buddha. In terms of actual practice, though, it is important to emphasize grappling with the karmically evil self.

Reverend Okumura: In Pure Land Buddhism or Shin Buddhism, the other power equals the self. We know in practice that the self includes all beings,

who exist as interdependent origination, which is the universal self. There is basically no difference, then, between Dogen and Shinran.

Buddhadharma: Dogen goes on to say, “When you forget the self, you are enlightened by the 10,000 dharmas.” Are the 10,000 things the same as the other power?

Reverend Okumura: It is the power beyond self and other. In Pure Land Buddhism, it is called “other power.” In Zen, we call it something like “Ten Direction World.” In that sense, the self and the other are not opposed to each other.

Buddhadharma: Bhante Seelawimala, what is the Theravada tradition’s view of other power and self power, and of supplication and prayer generally?

Bhante Wadawala Seelawimala: In Theravada Buddhism we don’t get into the discussion of self power or other power. We don’t use the notion of “power” in the same way to begin with. We believe our minds are weak in certain areas of our thinking. The ordinary mind is not working to its fullest capacity, but we can correct its drawbacks by proper mental exercises, by following the step-by-step guidance of the Buddha. Gradually, the mind starts to work properly and see things clearly. As a result we can overcome our suffering, frustration and fear.

Prayer is not a necessary part of the process of mental exercise as taught in the Theravada tradition. We discuss these matters in completely different terms than we have heard from Reverend Okumura and Professor Unno. The language is quite different.

Buddhadharma: In Theravada, are there any deities or universal buddhas or other such principles?

Bhante Seelawimala: That is not part of our language. We don't regard the Buddha as universal spirit, or self as universal self, or personal self. We don't discuss things in those terms. We don't have any power beyond dhamma. Dhamma means things as they really are, the power of cause and effect, *dhammata*- real knowledge of how things are. That genuine knowledge- knowing what causes what- can be used to improve our condition.

For example, if we understand that we are ignorant of how things work, we see what causes the ignorance. That help came from the Buddha, to be sure. We appreciate the Buddha for that and we appreciate the dhamma, which is the knowledge given by the Buddha. We appreciate other people who use the knowledge and thereby improve their conditions. That is called sangha.

We respect Buddha, dhamma and sangha as our model and our support system, but the actual work is done by ourselves. We don't have the notion of praying to someone or asking for help *from* someone.

Buddhadharma: In the Vajrayana tradition, there is strong emphasis on blessings and connection to the lineage of buddhas, bodhisattvas and teachers, who have the power to assist practitioners on the path. What, then, is the Vajrayana view of prayer and seeking the assistance of outside beings?

Sarah Harding: Vajrayana is famous for having quite possibly more deities than any other religion on earth. I'm a little reluctant, though, to make this dichotomy between self power and other power. Making that distinction between self and other is what is problematic in the first place. The one thing that seems to run through all traditions of Buddhism is that the problem of something either existing or not existing- something being either inside or outside- is in itself the problem.

All the different ways of looking at that are just different language to get at the same thing.

Vajrayana accepts all of the views that have been mentioned already, and includes for instance, supplication to Amida Buddha. It also accepts formless meditation, looking directly at just what is. In Vajrayana, all the traditions are seen as skillful means. In fact, if there is one thing that Vajrayana defines itself as, it is as a vehicle of skillful means.

So all of the ways of practicing previously mentioned are seen as different kinds of skillful means, as efficacious for different kinds of situations. I agree that if there is too much emphasis on the self, just on following oneself, that could be problematic, because most people tend to feel weak and incapable of extracting themselves from their conditioned existence simply through the power of meditation. In that case, it might be very good to open that up to the interconnectedness that exists beyond the self.

As Master Dogen says, if you try to find the self, you find everything. Vajrayana allows there to be vast and myriad ways of approaching the interconnectedness, while all the time accepting that you're not going to find it to be either other power or self power.

Buddhadharma: So if there is no self and other, why are there practices of supplication at all? Why is that a skillful means?

Sarah Harding: It is skillful means for the very reason that we are conditioned to a certain dualistic way of thinking, as Professor Unno mentioned at the beginning. When you are praying to Amida, ultimately that may be buddhanature. That is not to say, though, that one view takes superiority over the other- that this is the absolute truth, whereas the other is relative truth, or one is definitive whereas the other is interpretive. All these means are quite possibly a way to get past that kind of dichotomizing.

In the meantime, they provide effective language, effective mind sets, which work for different kinds of people.

Mark Unno: The language of self power and other power in the Shin tradition- and the practices associated with that language- arose precisely to dissolve, transcend or liberate the practitioner from these implicit dichotomist assumptions in daily human life, which are themselves the source of suffering.

The language was not formulated in order to establish self power and other power as entities, but to do precisely the opposite. The language is there to address the fact that, either explicitly or implicitly, people live their lives as if they are separate beings. As Ms.Harding said, this language is an expression of skillful means. In the Shin tradition, Shinran himself addresses Amida Buddha as the Buddha of Skillful Means.

Sarah Harding: I agree completely with that, and of course we certainly do behave as if there is a self.

Buddhadharma: Bhante, all of our panelists are discussing prayer in a very nondual way. Is there anything the Theravada tradition comparable to this particular approach to prayer?

Bhante Seelawimala: If any practice that leads to ultimate purity, or unlimited perfection, is defined as a prayer, then Buddhism is a prayer. Because that is what Buddhism is: it is a practice that leads to an end. There are two areas, theory and practice. Practice is what you really do, and theory is why you do what you do, and what you are going to get by doing what you are doing. What is the goal, the end result of the practices? In that sense, perhaps we could say it is prayer.

Sarah Harding: There is another way of seeing prayer. It can be seen as aspiration, as setting your mind in a certain direction. Whether you have a particular other being or other power in mind is not necessarily the main

thrust of it; the main point is that you are putting your mind in that direction.

For instance, if you send a Christmas card that says, “May there be peace on earth,” you are not necessarily asking someone to bestow it; you are simply making that aspiration.

Bhante Seelawimala: I agree with that. That is very clear from our tradition also. We constantly remind ourselves what our goal should be. That comes in many different ways, in many kinds of language.

Mark Unno: When one makes that aspiration, which can be considered as the working of bodhichitta- the aspiration for enlightenment- one is tapping into the path. In vernacular terms, the path may be understood as the bringing of all beings to enlightenment. In that sense, even if there is a specific object, it embraces the whole world in an awareness of this larger path.

Buddhadharma: In his book *Secret of the Vajra World*, Reginald Ray talked about the importance of “unseen beings” in Vajrayana Buddhism. He says that while ultimately the buddhas, bodhisattvas and enlightened teachers are not distinct from our own true nature, that this is also true of all beings in the universe. Therefore, these cosmic or unseen beings have at least as much relative existence as the other beings we relate to. So the question is, are the beings or forces we may relate to through prayer or supplication any less real than you or I?

Sarah Harding: To attribute degrees of existence to beings based on whether they are seen or not seen is, I would think, a product of scientific thinking. I wouldn’t want to try to do that. At the same time I wouldn’t want to either refute or prove the existence of any such beings. How could you eliminate all forms of energy and force just because you don’t see them? In that sense, I agree that maybe ultimately they are our own nature,

but that wouldn't be reducing them in any way. Our tendency to reduce something by saying, "Oh, it's *only* in the mind" is a mistaken approach.

It is not only the mind; it is everything. It would be foolish to single out what you see with your eye sense and not to relate to the whole universe of energy. Whether they have more existence or less existence- or whether you even want to relate to them or not- it would be limiting to make those kinds of judgments. The dichotomy is the whole problem. Whether it is inside your mind or outside your mind is a problematic way of thinking about it.

Mark Unno: Recently I had an opportunity to speak to a Shin Buddhist congregation, and they asked me to address the children first. On such occasions, I often ask the children questions, and most children who responded were between five and ten years of age.

I started by asking them, "Where is Amida Buddha?" The first child said, "Everywhere." And then I asked, "Where is everywhere?" The second child said, "Here." I asked, "Where is here?" The third child said, "In *your* heart." And I asked, "Where is *my* heart?" The fourth child said, "In *my* heart," and pointed to his heart.

Of course, in the Shun tradition an awareness in the heart, however profound, remains insufficient. Practice requires the full manifestation of body-mind-heart, in which Amida Buddha as formless compassion becomes manifest through the embodied act of saying the name.

Buddhadharma: People often talk about praying "from the heart," and perhaps every human being has an elemental need to do something called "pray." Is Buddhism's approach to prayer to try to direct that powerful impulse toward enlightenment?

Bhante Seelawimala: In the Theravada tradition, we are very reluctant to use the word "prayer" when we speak English. We don't even think of it as a Buddhist word. In the early Buddhist traditions, in the canonical texts,

there is nothing related to prayer. But nowadays, as you said, prayer is a human need. I think that's why people in all traditions have used certain verses and stanzas and mantras.

Still, we are reluctant to use the words "prayer" or "pray." I never say, "I'll pray for you" or "I'll think of you in my prayers." Even the phrase "prayer meditation" is not used when we speak in English. The main reason is that in the Theravada tradition, we don't have bodhisattvas or other deities we pray to, as in the Mahayana tradition.

Sarah Harding: In that light, what is the significance of the Theravada practice of reciting sutras?

Bhante Seelawimala: We recite the sutras often to remind ourselves what the teaching is, and sometimes as opposed to prayer, we say, "I will send you some blessings." I recite the sutta and then at the end of the recitation, I think of the person who might need help, and I send a blessing for that person for better health, or for whatever they need. That is my personal thing; I do it for them. But the recitation of the sutta is not the prayer itself. Mainly, we recite the suttas to remind ourselves what the dhamma is, not as a prayer.

Sarah Harding: You are setting the mind in a certain direction, then?

Bhante Seelawimala: Yes. I understand it as that.

Buddhadharma: In the Vajrayana tradition, there are supplications that many sanghas recite as part of their daily liturgy, such as this one attributed to Gampopa:

*Grant your blessings so that my mind may be one with the dharma.
Grant your blessings so that dharma may progress along the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path may clarify confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion may dawn as wisdom.*

Ms. Harding, what is the nature of these blessings being asked for, and when you are doing supplications like this, who are you addressing?

Sarah Harding: Anybody who will listen! I would think you are reciting these lines to set your mind in a certain direction. Just as with reciting sutras, you are reminding yourself of the teachings. You are wishing that you may have the realization you are praying for.

In terms of another being granting the blessing, if you come from a tradition, there are the ancestors of the tradition. If they have had an effect on you through their teachings, you couldn't say that they do not exist now. You are the accumulation of all of their wisdom, because they have passed it on through the teachings.

You acknowledge that presence just because it's there. You don't have to think that they are alive as people somewhere. This is talking about wisdom that you acknowledge, just as you acknowledge the Buddha's wisdom. Again, however, I don't want to reducing it by saying "Oh, it's *only* in my mind." You acknowledge all of the wisdom that has come from the various ancestors and that may exist currently in a variety of ways. That is who you are supplicating- whomever will listen.

Buddhadharma: In the Japanese tradition, there is a strong sense of reverence for the patriarchs and ancestors. In Zen, what is the relationship between the current practitioner and the ancestors?

Reverend Okumura: In one sense, those people are models of our practice. They are the predecessors who practiced the way we are following. To study and practice, we follow the same motives they followed. People who practiced this way in such difficult situations, because of their bodhisattva vows, also serve as a kind of encouragement for us. We remind ourselves that our dharma teaching and practice has been transmitted from Sakyamuni Buddha to us through those people. We also express our

gratitude; because of their practice and teaching, we can continue to practice.

Buddhadharma: This seems similar to what Bhante Seelawimala described as the Theravadan understanding.

Reverend Okumura: I think so. I was once asked by some Catholics to talk about prayer in Buddhism. In Japanese, the word “prayer” translates as “*inori*.” But there is no *inori*, or “prayer,” in the Buddhist dictionary. Originally, there was no such thing as prayer in Buddhism. I did find the equivalent of *inori* in the Mahayana Buddhism tradition, which is “vow,” or “bodhisattva vow.”

Mark Unno: In the Shin tradition, we also don’t use the word “prayer.” That term has a specifically hopeful association, which may not be helpful to the understanding of Shin or other Buddhist traditions. At the same time, the common understanding of prayer in Western culture is often not an accurate representation of what prayer is properly understood to be in the Christian tradition. It is a reduction, a popularized notion that doesn’t carry deeper significance. It could be helpful for us to appreciate that Buddhism also has a contribution to make to the ongoing meaning of the term “prayer,” since meanings are always changing.

Bhante Seelawimala: This might be a good opportunity for us to define what prayer is from the Buddhist perspective. As people have been saying, in this culture when you hear the word “prayer,” it has a different connotation than what we have been talking about.

Buddhadharma: It seems we have not used “prayer” so much to denote a relationship between a supplicant and a higher being but a process of opening or surrendering.

Bhante Seelawimala: If you have some word that represents a non-being, that also might be helpful. Can it be something other than a being? Like a power, an other power, a power in general, what we call *dhammata*?

Mark Unno: What is known as “other power” in Shin Buddhism is an expression of the *dharmakaya* and *dharmata*. They are very similar.

Sarah Harding: Ultimately, everyone would agree with that. Since we are getting into terminology, I would like to add that there are two words in Tibetan that relate to this area. One is *mönlam*, which is the “aspiration” that we were talking about, directing the mind. There is another term, *solwa dep*, which means supplication, something very much like prayer in the Christian tradition.

This is the skillful means of acknowledging that we live in a world of relationship, that a human being is a relating being. Beyond aspiring, it can be very effective in our practice to use the tendency we have to be relational. Prayer is an expression of that tendency.

* * *

Sarah Harding is a Tibetan translator and lama in the Kagyü school of Vajrayana Buddhism and editor of *Creation and Completion: Essential Points of Tantric Meditation* (Wisdom).

Rev. Shohaku Okumura is director of the Soto Zen Buddhism International Center in San Francisco.

Mark Unno is ordained in the Shin Buddhist tradition and is an assistant professor of East Asian religions at the University of Oregon.

The Venerable Wadawala Seelawimala is a Theravadin monk from Sri Lanka and professor at the Institute for Buddhist Studies and the Graduate Theological Seminary in Berkeley.

From the Introduction to the Visualization for Supplications

From Guru Rinpoche - His Life and Times, by Ngawang Zangpo

To visualize, to imagine an array of masters or Bodhisattva Divinities before us as we pray, certainly puts more demands upon us, but it provides a focus for the faith and devotion that motivate prayer.

Prayer gives wings to faith; visualization gives direction and intensity to prayer. Kongtrul commends the practice in this way:

If a meditator concentrates on these visualizations with the understanding that in essence they represent Guru Rinpoché transformed in appearance into different Divinities, achievement of enlightened activity and accomplishments will be exceedingly rapid. This has been specifically affirmed in other treasure texts.

Despite the skillful tool of visualization, supplication within tantric Buddhism, as in any path of spiritual development, is basically an expression of faith, devotion, and trust.

After having encouraged the use of visualizations, Kongtrul concludes with this advice:

Recite the supplications thinking of your principal spiritual master as inseparable from Guru Rinpoché.

Place your wholehearted trust in him: ask him to be aware of whatever you do at all times, during this life and the next.

You need have no doubt that by just one recitation of a supplication with such intense heartfelt devotion, respect, and yearning, you will receive the Master's blessing.

From the teachings of Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche

(In the Vajrayana) We aspire to a nonconceptually performed practice, free from grasping or clinging. This means that when we practice or meditate, we should not relate to our visualization as if it were a solid object.

Our visualization must be experienced as a dynamic display of the true nature, like a transcendent wisdom rainbow body. We must understand that the visualization is totally empty of inherent existence, yet totally full of dynamic energies of love, compassion, and wisdom...

* * *

Creation stage practice is understanding the purity of all phenomena including yourself, so that everything is perceived within the buddha mandala.

This mandala is not a solidly existent thing; it is of the nature of a reflection, a mirage, a dream or a rainbow.

It is a wisdom display of clear light, the luminosity aspect of the true nature...

I call upon my Teachers and Spiritual Ancestors,
Lord Buddha with your Retinue of Holy Ones,
please come to this place

May we all receive your blessings
May we all receive your light, inspiration, and strength

A Simple Visualization - The Refuge Tree

In this practice, we imagine the Buddha, ourselves, and others, as having bodies that are made entirely of light... and we see ourselves as being in a Paradise, or in a Pure Land...

Imagine that you are in a large, open, sacred space, beautiful, adorned with flower gardens, lakes, and wonderful trees, with birds sweetly singing...

The sun is brightly shining, as a few clouds float by... It's a lovely day... perfect in every way...

We see before us now the Buddha, the Divine Form we are meditating upon, or our main teacher, at the center of what appears as a great Refuge Tree, surrounded by Bodhisattvas, and all our ancestral teachers, going back generations, right down to our very own Root Teacher or Teachers...

These holy ones are all made entirely of beautiful light, and appear in the space in front and above us, on celestial clouds, on lotuses and moon cushions... They smile upon us...

Whatever is most pleasing and uplifting, that is what we see and feel before us now...

Imagining yourself to be praying in a Paradise, or in a Pure Land, or in the Garden of Eden can be very helpful.

Imagine that you are now praying in a perfect Pure Land, together with, and in the presence of all the exalted souls of the Saints and righteous people of the past and present...

*Imagine, as you are praying, that the Saints you have personally known, physically seen, or have heard about * are praying with you...*

Feel the elevated bliss, light, and power generated from such a visualization flowing through your prayers...

Have the sense that all these Noble Ones, the whole company of heaven and faithful here on earth are present...

'All should join together - one to the other and one above another - so that they all can receive the heavenly flow of blessings, by way of those above them who are closer to the source of supernal goodness...'

{The Baal Shem Tov}

With this Right View and a pure motivation, as we recite verses of refuge and aspiration prayers, meditate, and recite mantra, we visualize that we receive blessings from the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, from all the Bodhisattvas and Devas, from all Holy Beings, and from all that is sacred and pure in the universe, in the form of light and nectar. These dissolve into ourselves, and into all those we see as being with us now, our family and friends, those we don't know, and those who are experiencing any difficulty at all...

We visualize that the light and nectar purifies, heals and calms, nourishes, strengthens and inspires us all...

May all share in these blessings...

May all beings receive all they need to awaken and be free...

May all beings have happiness, and all the causes of happiness flourishing...

Meditate like this... Make prayers of aspiration...

To conclude, dedicate the merit to all beings.

On Devotion and Receiving Blessings - by Various Teachers

Ringu Tulku

Thrangu Rinpoche

Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche

Garchen Rinpoche

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche

Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche

Dudjom Rinpoche

Namkai Norbu

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

Kelsang Gyatso

Bokar Rinpoche

The Twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa

Rob Preece

Chamtrul Rinpoche

Mingyur Rinpoche

Chogye Trichen Rinpoche

Thich Nhat Hanh

The Qualities of the Guru

Homage to my teacher

Lama Yeshe

In Praise of Big Love

Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Dilgo Khyentse

Pabonkha Rinpoche

* * *

Faith, Devotion, and Blessings on the Path of Liberation

On devotion, by Ringu Tulku

Blessing is more about receiving than giving, because if it is an enlightened being, a compassionate being, they would naturally give *anything*, including blessing, to everybody, as much as possible, because they are beings of compassion. They have no other agenda, but to try to help...

They *are* giving blessings all the time. There is no time that they are not giving. But does that mean that we are receiving it all the time?...we don't receive them...

So therefore, receiving the blessing is most important from a Buddhist point of view.

Blessing means transformation, blessing means positive influence, positive transformation... it has different levels, to awaken our own buddha nature, the positive qualities in ourselves, {through the method}. That is the ultimate way of receiving the blessings

And in order to receive the blessings it is necessary to have *devotion*

And *understanding the quality of the enlightened experience* is very important as well, because if you don't appreciate that, then you won't want to receive the blessing.

So, devotion is like aspiration, and clarity, and certainty, and this kind of devotion is necessary, and then, deeply opening your heart for that...

That is why prayer is a good thing, is an important medium..

and Guru Yoga is an important way of doing that...

And in the mandala, you include every enlightened being...

Devotion, by Ringu Tulku

As you become calmer, you become clearer. The fewer concepts you have, the more clear you become. In a way, the only thing we can do to make realization dawn is to relax in meditation and do nothing. This is how we will come to know the nature of mind.

Realizing the nature of mind has nothing to do with how clever you are. Sometimes, having a great deal of theoretical understanding is not the best thing. The only quality that is always stressed is devotion. *Meditative experience can arise through devotion.*

Devotion has three special qualities: inspiration, aspiration and certainty. When you are certain that something is true, it sparks your devotion to act accordingly. Devotion is not the same as belief; it arises when something rings true to you. Devotion is based on understanding the dharma, and inspiration motivates one to practice.

The more you are able to let be and free yourself from concepts, the more you are able to open your heart. And the more you open your heart, the more you can relax in the nature of mind.

Using Devotion as a Medium for Meditation

From the teachings of Ringu Tulku

Devotion is a kind of feeling, a feeling of inspiration... It is an opening of the heart. When you feel devotion, when you feel inspiration, your heart opens. It's a kind of emotion...

There's a lot of similarity between devotion and compassion. They are both an opening of the heart.

Generally, compassion is an opening of the heart to other beings, and devotion is an opening of the heart to higher beings.

Therefore, for meditation, and especially meditations like Mahamudra, it's a very suitable mode, a medium for meditation.

That's why, maybe it's said that you actually can understand and realize Mahamudra *only* through devotion. Sometimes it is said like that.

And of course it relates to the three kinds of faith (faith as an intuition, verified faith, and unshakable faith), but it also refers to when our heart opens...

If we pray, and meditate, then devotion is a *clear* emotion. It's a very inspired emotion, but there is no attachment or aversion. There is no negativity in that. It's a very positive and clear emotion, an opening of heart...

When you are in a devotional state, and you allow your mind to be in that state, then it's not analytical - it's a non-conceptual state, but *a very aware*, a very clear, non-conceptual state...

So therefore, it's very often said that it's very easy to experience the true nature of your mind, your ordinary mind- the awareness, clarity, and emptiness nature of your mind...

When you're in a devotional state, and you look at your mind, your consciousness- then, 'look' does not really mean 'look' in a dualistic way, but *you feel* that state...

So, many times people get that experience of the true nature of our mind, the Mahamudra state, or the Dzogchen state when receiving an empowerment, or when doing guru yoga. Guru yoga is a practice of devotion...

On Devotion and On Receiving Blessings - by various teachers

Genuine devotion based upon trust and understanding is a very important medium in meditation. In a devotional state of mind we are free from negative emotions; there is no jealousy or anger, and not much attachment either. At the same time, devotion is very strong. It is an extremely intense, clean, and pure emotion. It is very distinct and has an almost nonconceptual quality.

When real devotion arises, we feel so uplifted that the hair on our body may stand on end and tears may well up in our eyes. In this state negative feelings do not have an opportunity to surface, so there is no delusion and no dullness either. It is an undiluted experience, very clear and precise. Devotion is not conceptual and does not involve any judgment. It is therefore the ideal state of mind in which to meditate. This is especially true of *Mahamudra meditation, which develops strongly in a state of devotion.*

- Ringu Tulku

Simply by receiving the blessing of the lineage, we can automatically develop a meditative state even if we have had no meditation practice previously.

- Thrangu Rinpoche

Three things are most important - devotion, diligence, and wisdom, or intelligence, or clarity.

We need to have a little bit of intelligence, or wisdom, or capacity. Without that, we can't understand, but even if we have that, we need to have diligence. Even if we have some understanding, or some little experience, we need to practice again, and again, and again.

Like we talked about with shamatha meditation - it's very simple. There's almost nothing that you can't understand, but then, just understanding doesn't make any difference to you. So, you need to do it.

It's the same with mahamudra, or vipashana - we can have some kind of experience or understanding, but then we need to continually practice that diligently.

But then, with all these things, it's not just your efforts, or your intelligence, you know... you are clever, and intelligent, and you work very hard, it's not that... it's a lot to do with, sometimes we call it blessings...

Something has to open up, and these things are not something we can do with effort. Your heart has to open. And there, devotion is very important.

That's why sometimes they say that experiences like mahamudra, and dzogchen, can only be through devotion. Sometimes they say like that. That's why guru yoga is always said to be an important path, an important medium with these meditations.

The more you have devotion, the more your heart is open, the more likely you are to have the experience of this.

That's why they talk about these three things.

- Ringu Tulku

When we use the very profound methods of mahamudra, when the guru points directly to the mind, then by meditating one or two days, perhaps one of us will realize the fruition. This is exceedingly fortunate. This is very important and is a very profound method. When we realize this quickly, we think, "I have realized just this one thing; the experience of mind." Some may scorn this, but we should never scorn this. It is truly the profound means to enlightenment. This is very important.

- Thrangu Rinpoche

If one just focuses on devotion one does not need to spend years studying debate, philosophy, grammar, art and so forth. In the past, thousands of practitioners attained accomplishment through the path of devotion combined with the paths of Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

- Tulku Urgyen

When we think with devotion of a past great teacher who has great wisdom and compassion, his or her qualities will be transmitted to our minds through the power of the unbroken lineage. That is because although the bodies of the old masters have died, their minds have never died. Their minds continue to remain pervasive as space. Thus whoever thinks of their great qualities with devotion will access their minds. Thus, our lineage is called the "practice lineage of blessings." This is something that scientists have not discovered. It is the meaning of 'Secret Mantra,' or 'Vajrayana Buddhism,' which teaches that depending on devotion one can receive the blessings and qualities of the guru. (65)

- Garchen Rinpoche

Even a short time spent meditating with great devotion will reveal more of our true nature than a hundred hours spent analyzing various philosophies.

The practice of Guru Yoga leads to the profound realizations of Mahamudra and Dzogchen, which penetrate to the core...

Devotion is indispensable in uncovering the qualities of wisdom...

Great blessings will come through this practice...

- Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche

On Devotion, by Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche

According to Dzogchen, and the special approach of the great Dzogchen master Shri Singha, there is a way of recognizing the nature of mind solely through devotion.

There are cases of practitioners who simply through their heartfelt devotion attained realization, even though their teacher had already passed away or was nowhere near them physically.

Because of their prayers and devotion, the nature of mind was introduced. The classic example is that of Jigme Lingpa and his consuming devotion for Longchen Rabjam.

In the prayer of Dorje Chang it is said that devotion is the head of meditation. This refers to the devotion which should be developed in the Vajrayana- a kind of devotion which completely and naturally awakens in oneself without imagination or fooling oneself. When it appears in one's mind, *common thoughts subside through the blessing of the lama and the experience of meditation arises naturally*, without putting any effort into meditation. Then the inspiration of the body, speech, and mind of the lama can be effective in oneself.

- From The Lama - The Source of Blessings, by Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche

The best method for eliminating obstacles during meditation is that of devotion to the Lama. Thanks to this, our mind becomes one with the mind of the Lama...

This is really the secret of meditation.

- Dudjom Rinpoche

People may sometimes feel that they have a problem because their teacher is not physically present with them.

We cannot spend all our time with our teacher. In fact this should not become a problem. The point is not that you always need the teacher nearby. It's true that you may sometimes need to ask the master something, but these days there are many possible ways of communicating with the master. If the teacher is still alive, it is always possible to meet with him or her at some point.

If you are really practicing seriously, you can, no matter what the situation, maintain communication with the teacher; because when you enter the practice and become a good practitioner, the teacher is found within you. The teacher is not only an external phenomenon. He or she can also manifest through your own clarity. We must have a clear understanding of this. The reality of our actual situation is that everything is not just external to us.

- Namkhai Norbu

The Lama is in our heart... The Lama *is* our true nature, and all we have to do is to really learn how to be quiet, and open to that nature, which is always within us, but normally covered over by all our busy conceptualization, and Trust in that;

And call out to the whole universe all the buddhas and bodhisattvas and the yidams and the Dakinis, and the protectors, and everybody, and say

Okay, here I am I've given my life to the Dharma, now what shall I do? You show me what to do... I have sacrificed and my life for you, so from your side, you, please reach out and help at this point ...

And really, if you trust in that and really really open yourself to their healing blessings, they will come; They will come, because the universe is filled with compassionate intelligence - we just have to plug into that energy, and it's through silence and surrender, and devotion;

It comes, because it's there always waiting, waiting to be called on;

Normally we're looking everywhere else. We don't know where we're supposed to be looking, but it's within us the whole time, just waiting, so trust in that...

- Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

On receiving blessings, by Ringu Tulku

From Meeting Challenges

Sometimes we pray and I think we can get blessings through that. Most probably we can get blessings- I am sure we can get blessings!, but how much blessing I get does not depend on how much blessing somebody else is giving. How much blessing I get is how much blessing I am able to receive.

From a Buddhist point of view, the Buddhas are trying to give blessing all the time. It is never the case that a Buddha withholds blessings, otherwise he or she is not a Buddha.

So, how much blessing I receive does not depend on how much blessing a Buddha is giving me, 'because he is pleased with me'. It depends on how much I can receive because I open myself to those blessings.

If I practice, if I really work on opening my heart, then I receive blessing, whether the Buddhas like it or not. They cannot help themselves but to give blessing.

So therefore, blessing is also not dependent on somebody else. It is dependent on me. This is how to understand it. This is the practice. **

On the unwavering cushion of the union of method and wisdom,
Sits the kind Lama who is the nature of all Protectors.
There is a Buddha in the state of the culmination of cessations and
realizations.

Beseech him in the light of admiration, by casting away cynical thoughts.
Don't let your mind go astray, but place it within admiration and reverence.
Through not losing mindfulness, hold it within admiration and reverence.

- Kelsang Gyatso, the VII Dalai Lama

Your spiritual master is like the sun in space -
When your doubts or wrong views do not cloud him,
His compassionate light shines continuously:
In yearning faith and devotion, pray.

- Bokar Rinpoche

Glorious and precious Root Guru who sits on a lotus-moon seat on the
crown of my head, through your great kindness, having taken me as your
disciple, grant me the accomplishments of the Body, Speech and Mind (of
the Buddhas).

- From a Vajrsattva Sadhana

True Devotion

When we pray to the Lama, we imagine his body, his face, his familiar expression facing us, and we think it's him, but truly, neither his body nor the expression of his face are quite the Lama.

The Lama is his mind and its own specific qualities.

When the Lama dies, some people may experience great sadness. The thought of not seeing his physical form any more creates in their mind a painful feeling of separation. In fact, when the Lama lets go of his physical form it is because he has finished transmitting what he wished to transmit to us.

If we have developed the understanding that our mind is not different from his, there is no more separation. There is no more sadness even if the Lama is no longer physically present.

That is true devotion.

- Kyabje Bokar Rinpoche

Many years ago in India, Tibet, Japan, Korea, and Thailand many people got enlightened, with the support and encouragement of wise and experienced teachers. Not many people are experiencing this kind of spiritual enlightenment in the West, in modern life and times. Why not? Because they are depending too much on the intellect; they're not depending on the lineage blessings and experience.

You can learn, you can know, but not necessarily be accomplished. You can be very big in your head, but that doesn't mean anything, except your head will be very heavy. And the teachings won't go to the heart because there's no lineage, no transmission of the authentic mind-to-mind non-conceptual blessings, from wisdom heart to your heart.

Question: What is it about authentic lineage that is passed on or transmitted?

A blessing. The blessing is something very mysterious, actually. It is not only mysterious, it has a lot of substance. There are also years and decades, centuries of experience here, amidst the blessings and teaching. There's an unbelievable sense of transformation of your mental state, liberating your mind and opening your heart.

How can I express it, because it's like tasting honey? It's sweet. But sweet means...what? It's inexpressible. I feel very happy, delighted, delicious, but I can't express it, until you taste it, and then we can share something of the experience together. This is one aspect of the blessing, of course...

- The Twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa

Adapted from Vajrapani - Clarifying Our Relationship to Power, by Rob Preece

The often used term *receiving blessings* is an interesting one in the context of tantric practice. In the Tibetan, the word usually translated as blessing is *jinlab*. This word is made of two syllables, *jin*, meaning power or inspiration, and *lab*, meaning *waves*.

The phrase that is sometimes used in reference to blessing is *receiving waves of inspiring strength*.

This phrase begins to make sense when we consider the nature of the energetic field within which practice is held. The subtle energy field {of contemplative awareness} is the domain within which we invite or invoke the a divine presence, such as that of our Noble teachers, the Buddhas and Celestial Bodhisattvas...

When we receive blessings, we are receiving waves of inspiration and power through this energy field we inhabit.

If we are open and receptive to the flow of their energy, it will change our own energy-body...

It is for this reason that after we have spent time in prayer, reciting mantra and engaging in visualization, it is important to rest quietly in the spacious quality of awareness that remains...

Within this quiet, open space, we digest {and assimilate} the felt experience of the practice, allowing both our mind and our energy-body to be subtly transformed...

When the process of prayer, visualization and recitation ends, rest in the space of awareness that remains, and, without any thought or visualizations, digest the effect on your mind and energy body...

It is helpful to notice the subtle felt-sense that pervades that spaciousness, enabling the effect of the practice to touch you more deeply...

.

Never underestimate the power of blessings.

Just how the sun shines on to this world without ever discriminating, the compassionate wisdom energy of all of the buddhas pervades everything. No matter where you are, no matter what you do, this energy is always there, it is always with you.

But just as you need to open your eyes to experience the light of the sun, you have to open your mind with unshakable devotion to experience the blessings of the energy of the buddhas. The more that your mind opens, the greater the blessings that will energize your mind and power your practice all of the way to your enlightenment.

You do not have to run around searching for blessings, as the compassionate wisdom energy of all of the buddhas pervades everything, everywhere. No matter who you are, or where you are, their energy is always with you.

All that you have to do is fill your mind with devotion, and your mind will just open up to their energy, and then the blessings will just naturally arise. The greater your devotion, the greater the blessings.

Never underestimate the importance of blessings. They uplift, clarify, and brighten your mind's energy, resulting in your mind becoming more powerful, and your practice becoming more fruitful.

~ Chamtrul Rinpoche

The living teacher embodies the wisdom of the practice lineage and functions like a lit lamp that has the energetic power to ignite the mind of the student. If you make a connection, you will get lit, too. This is what we call transmission.

Transmission or blessing does not just come through formal rituals and ceremonies, or through words. If a teacher rests his or her mind in realization and teaches from that place, that quality of mind can be expressed and communicated, and can be transmitted to a student ready to receive it. Through the teacher's hand gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and so forth, the student can receive and begin to embody the view that the guru is transmitting.

The living lineage comes through the teacher, not the historical Buddha. For the student, the teacher is kinder than the Buddha because he or she is the root cause of our spiritual maturation. Blessings come not only from the guru, but also through the guru, who is perceived not only as a living buddha but also as the prime vehicle for the dharma teachings and the noble sangha.

Our ability to recognize and use the benefits of the guru's blessings depends on our devotion. Devotion makes us receptive to all the guru offers.

- Mingyur Rinpoche

During an empowerment, if you have faith, you can receive blessings and recognize the true nature of mind. Even if the master is an ordinary person, if you receive the empowerment with faith, the blessings of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and lineage masters will reach you, and you will be able to gain an experience of the nature of mind.

The experience of the nature of mind that comes through blessings is called the descent of primordial wisdom. It is something that may also be repeated continually throughout one's own practice of receiving the empowerments during the practice of Guru Yoga.

- Chogye Trichen Rinpoche

From The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching, by Thich Nhat Hanh

If we read or listen with an open mind and an open heart, the rain of the Dharma will penetrate the soil of our consciousness...

The gentle spring rain permeates the soil of my soul.

A seed has lain deeply in the earth for many years just smiles...

When reading or listening, don't work too hard. Be like the earth. When the rain comes, the earth only has to open herself up to the rain. Allow the rain of the Dharma to come in and penetrate the seeds that are buried deep in your consciousness.

A teacher cannot give you the truth. The truth is already in you. You only need to open yourself - body, mind, and heart - so that his or her teachings will penetrate your own seeds of understanding and enlightenment. If you let the words enter you, the soil and the seeds will do the rest of the work...

The Qualities of the Guru , by Lama Yeshe

There is the need for an organic, living kind of force to come in touch with our heart.

The main reason that religion in both the East and the West has degenerated so much nowadays is the rarity of meeting good spiritual examples. If people never meet highly realized beings they have no way of knowing the limitless possibilities of their own human consciousness. It is not enough that there are texts recording the deeds and accomplishments of past masters. By themselves, such stories cannot inspire us very much. In fact, they may only increase our feeling of remoteness: "Buddha and Jesus lived such a long time ago," we may think, "and their purity belongs to another age. It is impossible for someone like myself living in this degenerate twenty-first century to attain anything resembling their level of purity."

The only way we can lay to rest these feelings of doubt, incapability and cynicism is by coming face to face with someone who has activated their highest potential. Only then do we have an example of purity and spiritual evolution we can actually see and relate to ourselves. Thus the outer guru is of utmost importance. We need the example of someone who, while human like ourselves, has developed beyond the bounds of what we presently think possible.

When we see someone who has reached beyond selfishness, who has transcended the petty concerns of this world while still living in the world, who speaks and acts from intuitive wisdom and who is truly dedicated to the welfare of others, then we can have faith and conviction that these attainments are possible for ourselves as well.

Homage to my teacher,
the Holy Exemplar,
in whom all Enlightened Qualities are found

On Guru Yoga

From An Introduction to Tantra, by Lama Yeshe

Either in front of us or above the crown of our head we visualize the main divine form we are practicing surrounded by the various gurus of the lineage. These lineage gurus are the successive masters who have passed on the teachings and realizations of that particular practice and include everyone from the first master of the lineage through to our own spiritual guide, the guru from whom we received the empowerment.

We then request the members of this assembly to bestow their inspiration and blessings upon us and, in response to this request, they merge with one another, enter us through the crown of our head in the form of light, descend our central channel, and dissolve into our heart center. As this happens, all ordinary dualistic appearances and conceptions dissolve into the clear space of emptiness. We then meditate upon the feeling that our guru, who in essence is identical with the bodhisattva-divinity, and our own subtle consciousness have become indistinguishably one.

The essence of the guru is wisdom: the perfectly clear and radiant state of mind in which bliss and the realization of emptiness are inseparably unified. Therefore, when we visualize the guru absorbing into our heart we should feel that an indestructible impression of that wisdom is being made upon our fundamental mind. From this time onwards we should try to recall this inner experience of great bliss and non-dual wisdom repeatedly, no matter what circumstances we may encounter.

In Praise of Big Love

Dear Nick,

I am writing to you this evening to express my deepest thanks for the publication of Big Love. I would have written sooner, but I kept having to wipe away the tears from my eyes...

I know now what it means when they say something is an auspicious event, because you have done justice to Lama Yeshe's remarkable life, which is quite an achievement.

I celebrate tonight, knowing full well that in times to come, all those who meet Lama through this book will be meeting his Great Love, and Wisdom. They will be connecting with the Mahayana Dharma, and incalculable benefit will surely come from that.

A little into the second volume, I suddenly realized that I was holding a sacred object in my hands. It is the result of millions of virtues, those of Lama Yeshe's, and *his* teachers; those of his students and benefactors, and the faith, and love and devotion of all those who worked over the years to bring this project to completion.

My deepest thanks to Adele, to you, Nick, to Lama Zopa, to the editors, designers, and printers, and all those who have added to the creation of this sacred work.

With gratitude,

Jason Espada.

With faith, we know with our hearts so much more than can be understood with the intellect.

Faith is also associated with devotion. If faith is trust and reliance, relaxing and believing in something, then devotion acts more like a magnet, drawing what we are devoted to to us.

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche has these beautiful and true things to say about devotion:

Devotion creates readiness, just as in the Spring the sun and rain make gardens ready to plant seeds and start growth.

and,

Devotion is the key that opens the door of pure vision. It leads us beyond darkness, doubt and hesitation; it will help us recover from periods of difficulty. Devotion takes us beyond conceptions to an understanding of the true nature.

- From A Belief in the Miraculous

When your mind is filled with devotion you also experience great inner peace. Your heart is full of incredible joy and you see yourself as unbelievably fortunate. Even though there might be other difficulties in your life, such as no money, no visa or no job, your strong guru devotion overwhelms your problems and external things don't bother you much. Your life becomes very enjoyable and very meaningful.

- Lama Zopa Rinpoche

To have devotion constantly in your mind will endow you with lasting serenity and satisfaction. Remembering even the name of your spiritual teacher is enough to completely transform your perceptions. Visualizing the guru above the crown of your head, even for an instant, can dissipate the veils of illusion.

Devotion is the ring that allows the hook of the teacher's compassion to pull you out of the mire of samsara.

Enlightenment, inherent though it is in the mind, seems so difficult to unveil, but if you develop fervent devotion and fuse the guru's enlightened nature with your ordinary mind, enlightenment can be realized. Truly, to meditate on the benevolent teacher is a spiritual practice more profound than any other.

– Dilgo Khyentse, from “The Hundred Verses of Advice”

Devotion can be cultivated by appreciating the exceptional qualities of the object of our faith.

Obviously, some people like Asians and maybe Latinos, in general, have a natural capacity for devotion, perhaps it is because they seem to have a closer connection with their heart emotions, but we can all practice.

Really, all can practice opening the heart, because this is how blessings are received. It's very important, if we want to get the blessings, then we have to open up our heart, and our heart is opened through our faith and devotion. So we need to recognize how important this is.

The way that Buddhism has been transplanted in the West, often bypasses faith and devotion, and it becomes very cerebral almost, all up in the head. We need very much to bring our practice down into a much deeper level of consciousness, which is opened through our faith and devotion.

And definitely, as I say, if we think of the object of our devotion and really appreciate that,

Why is this special?

What qualities do they enact which I also need to develop?

- then we feel deep appreciation and love and devotion. It just comes up from the heart...

~ Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

From Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand, by Pabonkha Rinpoche

They say we should recite verses on the guru's kindness when we contemplate how very kind he is. The following verses were spoken by Kumara Manibhadra in the section on the kindness of the spiritual guide from *The Laying Out of Stalks Sutra*:

*My spiritual guides, my exponents of the Dharma,
Are qualified to teach me all the Dharma;
They came with but one thought: to fully teach me
The tasks facing the bodhisattva.*

*Because they gave birth to me, they are like my mother;
They are like wet nurses feeding me the milk of good qualities;
They have thoroughly trained in the branches to enlightenment.
These spiritual guides keep me from that which harms.*

*They are like doctors who free me from death and old age,
Or like Indra the celestial lord raining down nectars;
They increase white Dharma like the waxing moon
And, like the shining sun, show the way to peace.*

*They are like mountains, unmoved by friend or foe.
Their minds are undisturbed like oceans.
They are dear ones who protect completely.
These were the thoughts that made me go to them.*

*Bodhisattvas, who are developing my mind,
Children of the buddhas who bring me enlightenment-
They guide me, the buddhas sing their praises.
I came to them with these virtuous thoughts.*

*They are like heroes for they shield me from the world;
They are my captains, my refuge and protection;*

*They are my very eyes, my comfort;
With these thoughts honor your spiritual guides.*

From *The Essence of Nectar lamrim*:

*I have given up family life, that pit of fire,
And carry out in solitude the Sage's deeds;
I taste the succulent nectar of the Dharma.
This is the kindness of my venerable gurus.*

*I have met the teachings of Tsongkapa,
Hard to find in a thousand eons of searching,
And gained faith in the way he taught -
This is the kindness of holy tutors.*

*Therefore my spiritual guides
Are protectors shielding me from lower realms,
Captains to free me from samsara's ocean,
Guides to lead me to high rebirth and liberation.*

*Doctors to cure me of chronic delusion,
Rivers to douse the great fires of suffering,
Lamps to remove the darkness of ignorance,
Suns to light the path to liberation.*

*Liberators from the closed prison of samsara,
Clouds that gently rain the holy Dharma,
Dear friends who help me, dispelling harm,
Kindly parents who are always loving...*

Contemplate these verses as you recite them, and remember the kindness of your own gurus.

Faith, Devotion, and Blessings on the Path of Liberation

When studying different Buddhist Wisdom teachings, we can notice how the insight they are pointing to is the same, and, we can also honor the unique qualities of each approach.

There are different ways to come to self knowledge, and to freedom from suffering. Some traditions rely on analysis to see through illusion. Study and debate, logic and the use of reasoning are the methods that lead to insight, revelation, and freedom from wrong views.

We can also have an experience of greater understanding and freedom through connecting deeply with an accomplished teacher. This is something that is not mentioned in most traditions.

*Faith comes in a few different ways. First, there is the *intimation* of a greater truth, something in us that says, 'Yes, this is the way to go'.

This becomes *verified faith*, as we follow our intuition. Our trust in a teacher or a tradition proves itself. We become healthier, more at peace, open to others and responsive.

After this, and higher than these two is *unshakable faith*. Having this kind of trust calms and steadies the mind. It becomes more clear, and experiencing the nature of mind happens quite naturally.

This kind of faith and trust is a little more of a challenge to talk about, because we're reaching now to some of the deepest connections a person can make with another in their lifetime.

When we speak of devotion to a teacher, this is something that is well known in Indian spirituality, but less so here in the West.

When we meet a teacher, and there is a deep karmic connection, something can happen that is inexplicable to the rational mind. At this point in our history here in the West, there are already a good number of stories of highly intelligent, educated and independent people being overwhelmed by such a meeting; they spontaneously cry, their heart opens, and right away there is a love and a trust they could not have imagined only moments before.

When there is this kind of a connection between a holy being and a student, it is unmistakable, rare and precious. As Ringu Tulku said, in meeting the spiritual teacher, half the journey is already complete. We can have an experience of awakening and insight in a moment, directly.

This is not easy to talk about, and it's certainly not the path for everyone. In fact, the progressive path is still often recommended in the Mahamudra tradition, even for those who have had such a profound connection and experience. It is considered safer, with less possibility of steps being left out.

The upside of faith and devotion as a path should be spoken as well, however, and praised as it should be, for those who can take this path.

It's possible that connecting with the enlightened mind of a realized teacher communicates more in a brief time than through years of study. I can say, I have some small experience of this happening. It is mysterious, and tangible.

They say in some lineages that it's possible to meet the mind of a teacher through his writings, or by seeing a blessed statue- and Indian spirituality would add- through dream or vision in meditation - and although this sounds like it's speaking metaphorically, the truth of it is, *this can actually happen*.

This is something that can't be manipulated, or bought, or else I'm sure everyone would take this easier path. Step by step learning by comparison at times can feel laborious, fragmentary, and very very slow. This is more a path of learning by intuition, and through love.

Connecting with an enlightened teacher communicates blessings. The energy is purifying, healing, illuminating, enriching, and vivifying. It brings with it a feeling of safety, and a keen, heightened awareness.

Faith and devotion we can notice here are related. Faith is *an openness*, or we can say, *a trusting receptivity*. Sometimes this comes after careful reflection, and sometimes it is just there - immediately, and beyond any amount of reason. It's amazing when this happens, and it is so unusual that it calls for our full attention. This is a kind of awakening in itself, with some part of ourselves knowing in a new way, and deeply trusting another.

Devotion comes soon after this, sensing the exceptional qualities of our teacher, as a realized being. These exceptional ones teach more by who they are than what they say. I have had the thought that *these are people I can learn from my entire life...* they are like looking up at the great Himalaya mountains, and seeing more and more...

Ringu Tulku describes devotion as *inspiration*, and, *an opening of the heart*.

As I mentioned, this is not at all the usual way of talking about learning, or about liberating realization, especially here in the West. Each approach has its own special strengths, and can be taken on their own terms, whatever works best for us.

*When it comes to liberation, it's in the Mahamudra and Great Perfection traditions that we hear of the great qualities of devotion.

Here are a few teachers speaking about this profound quality:

Simply by receiving the blessing of the lineage, we can automatically develop a meditative state even if we have had no meditation practice previously.

- Thangu Rinpoche

When we think with devotion of a past great teacher who has great wisdom and compassion, his or her qualities will be transmitted to our minds through the power of the unbroken lineage.

- Garchen Rinpoche

If one just focuses on devotion one does not need to spend years studying debate, philosophy, grammar, art and so forth. In the past, thousands of practitioners attained accomplishment through the path of devotion combined with the paths of Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

- Tulku Urgyen

and,

Mahamudra meditation develops strongly in a state of devotion.

- Ringu Tulku

Devotion is such a unique and precious human quality. With devotion, the mind is vividly awake, enthusiastic, and present. This is a kind of love, one that acts like a magnet for the blessings we receive from our teacher and the lineage, of inspiration, light and strength, and joy.

The closest we can come to describe devotion to a spiritual teacher, for someone who has not yet had such an experience is to say that it's something like being in love. The object of our affection is in our heart continually, shining there, bringing us joy. We cherish this connection.

It can be like this with a Noble Spiritual Friend, believe it or not, and it's possible that the connection goes even deeper. They open us to depths we didn't know we had.

A realized being, a Buddha, shows us something no ordinary relationship can ever give, and that is the way to liberation from the entirety of samsara. They themselves embody this inner freedom, peace and joy, and that is precious beyond measure. It's greater than anything else in the world. When we have doubts about the teachings, or about our own capacities, we need only think of them. They show us directly what is possible as human beings.

Since it's good for us to know and respect all valid spiritual paths, I've written these few celebratory words.

*May we all realize complete freedom,
and lead all others, without a single exception
to that very same state!*

On Dedication, by Tulku Thondup

Our aspirations will be accomplished because of our Enlightened Attitude, Bodhicitta. So that's why we are saying prayers and connecting with such powerful intentions, and powerful goals...

What wonderful opportunity for all of us. Especially today, I think you are adding a few prayers for {Lydia's mother, Micheline}.

So it is time to remember that particular person and pray to Guru Rinpoche, pray to the Buddha, and pray to the bodhisattvas for their blessings, for all sentient beings, including and especially {the one we are praying for in particular} for their journey to Pure Land...

So we are all praying and we are all dedicating our merits...

If we dedicate the merits, is not that we will just exhaust those merits, but if we dedicate *more* - to *more people*, to *infinite beings* in the boundless universe, then, the merits of the prayers, power of the prayers will increase and increase because of the scope of our prayers...

The scope of our intentions will increase and expand because we are dedicating the merits to *all* sentient beings - to *the boundless happiness* of all sentient beings...

So, if we do that, then the merits of the prayers, of the aspirations will increase boundlessly...

It doesn't matter if it's a one simple prayer, or one simple offering, but connecting with such a powerful time, and such a powerful place, with powerful meditations and powerful blessings, then when we dedicate or the say prayers, the benefit reaches to all sentient beings and especially the intended person...

It seems like a simple meditation, but if expand our intention then it will become a *boundless meditation, boundless dedication, boundless service...*

So that's why, when we say mantras, when we offer candles and flowers, we dedicate the merit to all mother beings - infinite mother beings... {saying}

*By the power of guru Rinpoche,
by the power of Buddhas,
and by the power of the bodhisattvas...*

- then our aspirations will be accomplished because of the Enlightened Attitude, Bodhicitta.

So that's why we we saying prayers connecting with such a powerful intention and powerful goals...