

A Teaching on the Significance Eight Offerings

by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche (5/1/1993)



The subject here today is an explanation of the significance of the eight offerings. We make these offerings to the enlightened beings in many practices - in the Vajrasattva practice, Guru Yoga, and a lot of other practices. We have been doing this for a long time, so I thought it would be useful if we studied a little about what that practice signifies.

The enlightened beings do not want or need these things. We make offerings for our own benefit, to accumulate great merit and wisdom. Enlightenment, Buddhahood, is achieved through the two great qualities - accumulation and purification. As you know, the Buddha has limitless qualities, which were gained through the great accumulations and purifications. Our offerings are a simple way to accumulate both merit and wisdom.

OFFERING WATER TO CLEANSE THE MOUTH OR FACE - Auspiciousness

First is the water offering to cleanse the mouth or face. It signifies auspiciousness or all the positive causes and conditions which bring positive effects. So, make an offering of water which is clean, fresh, cool, smooth, light, delicious, comfortable to the throat and stomach - these qualities are the qualities of auspiciousness. When you drink that kind of water, it is healthy; if you take a shower with it is healthy. While you make this kind of water offering to the enlightened beings, visualize an ocean of water. Then we dedicate this water to become a cause for all sentient beings to also collect positive causes and conditions. So this is the first water offering - to cleanse the mouth or face.

OFFERING WATER TO WASH THE FEET - Purification

Second is water to wash the feet. This is clear water mixed with incense or sandalwood which is made as an offering to all enlightened beings' feet. The symbolic meaning is purification. By cleansing the feet of the enlightened beings, we cleanse all our own negative karma and obscurations. By making offerings to clean the enlightened beings feet, we are really cleaning the "feet" of our own mind. With respect, devotion and confidence, we offer an ocean of this kind of water to all enlightened beings to purify all the temporary obscurations of ourselves and all sentient beings. Obscurations are called "temporary" because they can be purified. If they were permanent, we could not purify them even if we make an effort. So meditate on this when you make these offerings. All the different types of obscurations -- gross, subtle, negative karma, afflictive emotions, and obscurations to enlightenment -- all these different types of obscurations become fully purified.

OFFERING FLOWERS - Generosity

Next is offering of a flower, the flower of the beauty of enlightenment. It signifies the practice of generosity and opens the heart. A flower is very beautiful; so you naturally want to keep it. But when you offer it to others, there is some special feeling in the mind. With that connection, make the offering and practice freedom from stinginess. Milarepa said there is no special practice of generosity if one is free from stinginess. Meditate on that by offering flowers, which signifies the practice of generosity. May all sentient beings achieve the freedom and endowment of a precious human life.

Flowers are offered to the head of the enlightened beings, for them to wear on the crown of the head. Within the practice of generosity, we immediately think of giving wealth, giving fearlessness, giving wisdom -- there are many different types of generosity. Usually when we say generosity, we immediately think of giving wealth, but it is not only that. For example, giving fearlessness means giving life. If someone is afraid for their life, like drowning in water, and if you give them safety from the water, this is called giving fearlessness, giving freedom from danger to life. Giving wisdom is very special generosity. When we give teaching to one who has no wisdom -- does not know what samsara is, what enlightenment is, or what the cause of suffering is -- that is such a great gift. To help them understand "Oh, that is samsara, that is enlightenment." Such a great gift! So, offering a flower symbolizes generosity.

OFFERING INCENSE - Discipline, Moral Ethics

The fourth offering is incense, which symbolizes moral ethics or discipline. Moral discipline is one of the most important practices. In the West, maybe discipline and morality are a little bit different. What I mean here is that when we have good discipline, there is morality. Discipline is in the teaching of the Dharma. For instance, it says, "do this, this, this. Sit like this, meditate like this." It is taught like discipline. So when we do that, it is good moral ethics; when we cannot do these things that are taught to be done, then there is no morality, no ethics. In Sanskrit, this is called "shila". Shila means coolness, freshness. When we have good discipline, it cools the mind free from suffering. When we stay in that position well, it relaxes the mind and frees it from agitation. All these disciplines are part of the process of progressing in our meditation practice. Unless these disciplines and moral ethics are there, it is not possible to achieve enlightenment. Therefore, Buddha gave these three teachings -- moral ethics, samadhi and wisdom -- called the Three Trainings. These Three Trainings are very important. Wisdom or special insight comes from samadhi, the stability and strength of the mind. That kind of strength in the mind is based on discipline and morality. So they are all related to each other, are connected to each other and depend on each other. Therefore, moral ethics is a very important aspect of path.

Incense, which is the nature of morality, makes offerings to the nose of the enlightened beings. The enlightened beings are not attached to smell, but to our purity. All people respect those who have kept moral ethics well. It doesn't matter who they are, they get respect because they are trustworthy and dependable. That kind of person gives a good smell, good odor, and people are attracted to that. Not only people, but the qualities of enlightened beings are also attracted by that morality. It is their foundation/basis, like the ground which grows all the "crops" of the enlightened qualities.

OFFERING LIGHT - Patience

Fifth is light or a lamp, which signifies the stability and clarity of patience, the beauty which dispels all ignorance. Light offering is made to the eyes of all the enlightened beings, who see clearly without mistake. Some people feel patience is showing weakness or pessimism. But, actually, patience shows the strength and clarity of mind, which are based on wisdom and compassion. Without proper wisdom and compassion, one cannot practice patience. So light shows that the strength of the mind, the clear, stable nature of the mind, achieved through the practice of patience. Because the mind is not disturbed by other forces, it has such great qualities: clarity knows what is to be done, which is necessary, which is not necessary. That dispels ignorance.

Patience can be practiced in all different forms, different ways, not just when people are faced with anger. For example, there is patience in Dharma practice and study. First, this is based on wisdom, so we should have such wisdom to really know how Dharma is, what quality it has, the depth and vastness of Dharma, and how we can achieve these qualities. Seeing those great qualities, then we need patience to study and practice. When we have that, there is a mind of clarity, of stableness.

On the other hand we should not be patient with our afflictive emotions. When we have anger, desire, jealousy, pride, don't practice patience with these! This is the wrong way to practice patience. Even if it is hard or painful, these are subjects to get rid of or purify; they don't do any good thing. Without sacrificing something, there is no chance that we will have peace and happiness. So no matter what kind of pain we face, what difficult circumstances we face, we have to go thru it. Even if we have to sacrifice this life, it is worthwhile to sacrifice. A lot of people commit suicide to get rid of all these afflictive emotions. They are overpowered by the afflictive emotions and they kill themselves. That is the wrong way to sacrifice this life. We have to sacrifice this life the other way around. Buddha said that if we have to lose our life to keep the moral discipline, it just finishes this life, but next lives will be higher and higher, better and better. But if we do it the other way around and sacrifice this life for the afflictive emotions, then we will go worse and worse.

In Shantideva's text it is said that we should not commit suicide or give this body without much purpose. Rather, we should cherish this precious human life. An explanation is given. When a medicinal tree is very small plant, it has to be protected in order to grow into a huge tree. If you pick it up when it is small, it will benefit only a few and then it is finished. But if you protect it well with many fences, it will grow into a huge tree that will bring fruits, flowers, roots, leaves, branches for the benefit of many, many sentient beings. Similarly we have a fragile mind at this time. We must protect this precious human life with all these antidotes, fences, and let it grow big. Then we can benefit many sentient beings. By the practice of patience, all the 112 major and minor marks of a Buddha will come. Of course, we should not expect it, but the result of patience is a healthy, good body, to which all people are attracted, which is respected and admired. All this comes from the practice of patience.

OFFERING FRAGRANCE - Perseverance

Next is the offering of perfume or the fragrance from saffron or sandalwood. -- all the different types of perfume. That signifies perseverance or joyous effort. Through that one quality, one develops all the qualities of enlightenment. Without perseverance, without joyous effort, nothing can be achieved. Even in samsara, we have to work so hard to achieve anything. A lot of people sacrifice a lot of things just for samsaric achievement. You sacrifice your life for your work; if you die, what will you do with your wealth? So now, see the other side -- Dharma study and practice. When we could make such a great effort to study, practice Dharma, we have to sacrifice some little thing. It is

said in Shantideva's text that studying Dharma is the cause to freedom from suffering. To achieve ultimate enlightenment, ultimate happiness, why can't we do that? Others in samsara, they even sacrifice their life for their achievements, but that becomes a cause only for suffering. So see that. As flowers were offered to the eyes of enlightenment, perfumes are offered to the Buddha's mind because perseverance is the heart of enlightenment. Perfect generosity, moral ethics, patience, samadhi, wisdom -these all depend on perseverance. Without joyous effort none of these can be accomplished, so it is the heart, the essence. Meditate that by this offering, may all sentient beings progress in their attainment of the qualities of enlightenment.

OFFERING DELICIOUS FOOD - Samadhi

Seventh is the offering of delicious food which has a lot of different tastes. The delicious, excellent quality of food signifies samadhi, which is a nectar or ambrosia to feed the mind. This is an offering to the tongue of the enlightened beings, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Samadhi is also the source of all the siddhis like clairvoyance. There are two different types of clairvoyance -- ordinary clairvoyance is usually from other lifetimes. The other type is special insight clairvoyance, which we achieve this lifetime through meditation practice. Flying in the sky, different types of miracle power, these can all be achieved through samadhi, the virtuous one-pointed mind. The very stable mind, one-pointed, clear, calm, peaceful mind of samadhi becomes a basis to achieve all the enlightenment qualities. Food symbolizes samadhi because eating food maintains this body, and samadhi is a kind of food that maintains the mind as well as the physical body. When you achieve any kind of samadhi, it is the fruition of the effort you made before, and it can also become a path to get higher fruition. Generally, when we eat nutritious healthy food, it makes our health better. So if we have the nutritious food of samadhi, it keeps the health of the mind. It makes the mind healthy, clear, calm and peaceful. By making this offering of delicious food, may all sentient beings have the health which results from the samadhi food. May all sentient beings have the samadhi nature, quality.

OFFERING OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS - Wisdom

Last is the offering of musical instruments. There are different types of instruments -- cymbals, bells, guitars, lutes - - all of these are offered. Their nature is wisdom, which makes an offering to the ears of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and all the enlightened beings. Sound represents wisdom because wisdom is a special power of the mind which penetrates phenomena. Compassion is achieved through great wisdom; interdependence of all phenomena is realized through great wisdom. of course all phenomena have the nature of interdependence, causes and conditions, but sound is especially easy to understand. If you play a guitar, what does the sound depend on? it does not come just from the piece of wood, the string, not from the finger. So where does it come from? It comes from all these things, none alone is sufficient to produce the sound. That nature is called illusion. We can hear the Sound, but it has no independent existence. So we should see all sound having that nature. It just comes and goes like an echo. That realization is wisdom, and through that realization we can attain supermundane quality. May the wisdom, that quality of the supermundane, arise within the minds of all sentient beings and free them from all confusion and ignorance. May they achieve enlightenment.

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