

INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHIST ASPIRATION PRAYERS

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OF "A BOOK OF COMMON TIBETAN BUDDHIST PRAYERS"*

As 'modern' Buddhist practitioners, we must be careful to understand the nature and purpose of liturgy in the Buddhist tradition. Every major Tibetan lineage of Buddhism treats study, reflection, and meditation as a seamless continuum of spiritual training, in which prayer recitation plays an integral role.

Indeed, the Buddhist *sutras* were first preserved and transmitted as an oral tradition, and are still recited aloud today as a form of study, meditation, and worship. Other types of prayers, composed in open or metered verse, embody profound expressions of spiritual views, goals and methods of practice in summary form. Je Tsong Khapa's "Three Principal Aspects of the Path" is a prime example, as it introduces the practitioner step by step to the general Mahayana teachings.

In fact, the term 'prayer' hardly captures the sense of any of the Tibetan terms which it is employed to translate. In particular, the term *mon lam* denotes a way, an approach, to formulating and realizing our highest aspirations. It is an articulation of purpose: a mission statement. Thus, a *mon lam* belies any sense of helplessness or desperation with which the notion of prayer might be associated. It also rejects the notion of prayer as mere wishful thinking.

Rather, for practicing Buddhists, a *mon lam* harnesses and directs the natural power of our own minds, and invokes the power of the reality or truth of interdependence to yield actual results or benefits from that effort, dedication and purpose. This dynamic is conveyed by the *den tsig*, or declaration of truth, with which an aspiration prayer typically concludes. An example is found in the final stanza of the Dewachen Aspiration, which says:

By the blessings of Buddhas who have attained
the three *kayas*, by the blessing of the truth
of immutable *dharmata*,¹ and by the blessing
of the undivided purpose of the *sangha*,
may this aspiration prayer be accomplished
exactly as intended!

Thus, when we pray, "may that to which we have just aspired come to pass," we assemble the causal factors and articulate the reasons why the desired outcome *should* transpire, rather than ask for a result that magically circumvents the conventional truth of interdependence. Through our aspiration prayers themselves, all necessary and supporting

¹ Here the 'truth of immutable *dharmata*' is a reference to the reality and validity of *dharma*, completing the triad of jewels of refuge (Buddhas, Dharmas, and Sanghas), as *dharmata* is the final *dharma* of realization.

factors of relative and ultimate truth are invoked, such that, through the reality of interdependence, the effect to which we aspire is brought that much closer to becoming true.

Prayer, in other words, is about bridging the gap from ‘aspiring’ to ‘transpiring.’ In the Buddhist view, everything good that we do, everything we can accomplish, begins as an aspiration. *Mon lams* both crystallize our intentions, and help us to realize them; they help us resolve our goals, and lead us toward them. We recite *mon lams* to chart the course of our own spiritual practice and progress.

The liberating examples of great *bodhisattvas* of the past illustrate how all great works start as aspirations. The particular paths pursued by Tara and Amitabha, Manjushri and Samantabhadra, and the results they each achieved, followed and flowed from the aspirations they made. Through their pure view and aspirations, they developed unique abilities to perform enlightened activity on behalf of sentient beings, and manifested unique pure realms of existence.

As practitioners we seek to emulate their examples. That is why their stories are called models or exemplars of liberation—*nam tar*. We even say in many aspiration prayers: “I seek to follow in the footsteps, to reproduce the examples of these great bodhisattvas.”

His Holiness Orgyen Kusum Lingpa often reminded students of this key point. According to the Buddha, he explained, true improvement requires the coordination of three primary factors. First, the basic cause of our development—whether in this life or from lifetime to lifetime—is proper conduct. Second, the supportive conditions for our growth are acts of kindness and charity. Third, what gathers the force of these two factors and directs it in a specific, positive direction, is the power of pure aspiration. It is clear that these three factors of which he spoke are in accord with the operation of cause and effect.

Aspirations thus channel our life force, enabling us to cross the gap, or leap over the divide, between where we find ourselves in one moment, and strive to be in another. It is, once again, through powerful aspirations to serve the needs of living beings, fueled by the power of mental and physical energies gathered through arduous practice, focused prayer, and virtuous acts, that evolved beings—*bodhisattvas*—incarnate to show us the way forward, and to preserve and uphold the lineages and teachings of Buddhadharma.

Among the well-known ‘four *dharma*s’ or principles of Gampopa and Longchenpa, the practice of *monlams* therefore pertains most closely or specifically to the second: turning *dharma* into (onto) the path. Once we have turned our minds or attention towards spiritual values (the first principle), we must define and follow a path to enact and live out those values.

By adhering to the path we have defined and to which we are committed, we remove confusion (the third principle), so as, finally, to reveal the underlying wisdom that stands behind the appearance of confusion within our thinking minds and emotions (the fourth principle).

To summarize this point, as the Master Mipham explains in his instructions on how to practice the *sadhana* ritual of Buddha Shakyamuni, quoting from the *sutra* entitled “Demonstrating the Qualities of the Realm of Manjusri,”

"All dharmas are consistent with conditions.
They are poised on the tip of volition.
Whatever one may aspire towards,
one will obtain a result consistent with that."

Invoking the power of speech through prayer and other recitations is also an important element of the path of skillful means in the Vajrayana vehicle of Buddhism. It is one of the principal tenets of Secret Mantra that fully integrated engagement of body, speech and mind (through *mudra*, *mantra*, and *samadhi*) greatly increases the potency and efficacy of meditation practice. These are all dimensions of our being, and both the source and conventional expression of the full range of *kayas* (dimensions) of enlightenment. In the Mantra vehicle, therefore, recitations of prayer are hardly superfluous or insignificant. *Sadhana* practices, in particular, invariably contain many types of prayers, though their significance is often underappreciated by practitioners racing through them to get to some later stage of meditation. This is an enormous topic on which I shall not expound here.

The term *mon lam* also may refer to the totality of an arrangement of recitations performed (typically) by an assembly or convocation of (usually) ordained practitioners, in a monastery or at a holy site, over the course of several days. In this sense, a *mon lam* is a special practice event, a great prayer festival, termed a *mon lam chenmo*.

Thus, every year, tens of thousands of ordained and lay Tibetan Buddhist practitioners gather at auspicious times in sacred locations around the world to spend several days together reciting aspiration prayers, following in the footsteps of the great beings, like Bodhisattvas Manjusri and Samantabhadra, who came before, and showed the way. Many of these convocations bring together the members of a particular lineage, school or community, while others, like the 2012 Rimay Monlam at Garrison Institute, are designed to be ecumenical (non-sectarian).

A *mon lam chenmo* is not just a ceremonial recitation of prayers; it is structured to review or rehearse the entire Buddhist path of training in the course of a single day. It is bounded by the *dam pa sum*, or three excellent features. The daily program begins with renewal of the refuge and *bodhicitta* commitments; progresses through ever more sublime meditation rituals; and concludes with a series of aspiration and dedication prayers.

All of the recitations are performed as *don gom*, *i.e.*, with undistracted attention to both the words and their meaning at all times. Thus, recitation and meditation are both synonymous, and mutually reinforcing. Concentrating on the words one is reciting undistractedly while seated in meditation posture, and even visualizing clearly what the words describe, is calm abiding, *samatha*. The insights to which the words direct you, blossoming within your own mind, are *vipassana*. *Don gom* is therefore an instance of the unity of *samatha* and *vipassana*, the two components of all Buddhist meditation systems.

The *mon lam chenmo* program encompasses all three major vehicles of Buddhist practice, and the trainings in view, meditation and conduct of both *sutra* and *tantra*. It is designed to expedite and enhance the two accumulations of relative merit and ultimate wisdom.

It would be a mistake, in other words, to identify the practice of *mon lam* exclusively with the *sutra* vehicles. The practice of *mon lam* is not only *don gom*, it is also *mos gom*. *Mos gom* means that we are not just aspiring to, but actually modeling the state of liberation, of universal enlightenment, consistent with the view and approach of Mantrayana.

Interestingly, therefore, whether as Buddhists we conceive that we are praying to enlightened beings imagined to be out there somewhere, or whether we see our prayers as simply a skillful means to connect with the Buddha Nature that is the ground and ultimate state of our own being, really makes no difference.

Either view, being conceptual, is simply provisional and indicative. Our efforts will bear fruit, no matter which concept fits our minds better. Bodhisattvas at high levels of realization practice with full dedication, even while they realize that the one who is praying, that to which they are praying, and the act of prayer—the three spheres of action—are illusory, without any true existence. In short, there is no contradiction between the relative virtue of prayer and any level of the view along the Buddhist path, as, in the end, relative and ultimate truth are themselves not distinct.

Whether it is lineage-specific or universalist, there is a common core of prayers at the heart of a *mon lam chenmo*, including, typically, the *Zang Chod Monlam* (Aspiration for Outstanding Conduct), the *Jam Pal Tsen Jod* (Professing the Qualities of Manjusri), the *Dewachen Monlam* (Aspiration for Rebirth in Dewachen), the dedication chapter from Santideva's *Bodhisattva-caryavata* (Undertaking the Conduct of A Bodhisattva), and others.

Accordingly, these essential prayers that Tibetan Buddhists have been reciting for many hundreds of years—which, indeed, are a central vertebra in the very backbone of their tradition—are all included in the Rimay Monlam program. Also included are a handful of important *sutras* that are recited daily in virtually every Tibetan Buddhist monastery, and incorporated into a *mon lam chenmo*, such as *Sherab Nyingpo* (Essence of Wisdom), *Pungpo Sum* (Three Heaps), and *Kon Chog Sum Je Dren* (Recalling The Three Jewels).

The tantric component includes a complete two-stage yoga *sadhana* ritual based on a *mandala* of Manjusri, arranged principally by the third Dodrupchen Rinpoche, His Holiness Jigme Tenpa'i Nyima, and supplemented with verses composed by Tulku Hung Kar Dorje, the current abbot of Lung Ngon (Blue Valley) Monastery in Tibet, and founder of its *mon lam chenmo*.

Moreover, as in all tantric practices, the *mon lam* program includes a variety of skillful techniques for stabilizing, enhancing and guarding the results of spiritual practice, as taught by the great Vajra Master, Kyabje Tulku Ugyen. The protector rituals, praises, supplications, the Vajra Knot dedication composed by Terdak Lingpa, and so forth, fulfill these special purposes.

I trust that this concise explanation will prove useful to all those who aspire to join us in dedicating their time, effort, and prayers to the furtherance of the Tibetan Buddhist Rimay practice movement in the world!

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