

7. THE SEVEN-BRANCH PRACTICE

*Based on Samantabhadra's Aspiration for Excellent Conduct*¹

All of our actions are motivated by the wish to obtain happiness and eliminate suffering. Happiness arises from wholesome deeds; suffering arises in dependence on unwholesome actions. The practice of the seven branches is a means for accumulating wholesome deeds and purifying our negative actions. Among the many methods taught by the Buddha for accumulating virtue, the seven-branch practice is exceptional because it is a very skillful, simple and effective way to accumulate a great deal of merit.

It is necessary to study whatever Dharma we might practice. If we do not study before undertaking a particular practice it will be difficult to know how to accomplish it. Even if we are not able to study in depth, we should at least study these seven branches, otherwise we will not be able to practice them effectively. A great many Dharma practices are condensed into this one practice. Our tradition has many rituals and practices from both the Secret Mantra or Vajrayāna, and the Sutrayana teachings. This practice of the seven branches is an essential part of both vehicles. Of these two, we will discuss the seven-branch practice according to the Sutrayana extracted from the bodhisattva Samantabhadra's *Aspiration for Excellent Conduct*, a prayer containing the essence of the teachings as it has been blessed by the Buddha himself.

PAYING HOMAGE

The first of the seven branches, paying homage, is the action of reverence. Reverence can be expressed in three ways: with our body, with our speech, and with our mind. We express our respect with the body by bowing down to the floor, bringing our five limbs into total contact with it.² In

terms of speech, we pay respect by voicing praises. As for our mind, we express our reverence by practicing devotion. When we perform prostrations regularly, we should prepare a physical representation of the Buddha and make offerings to it. It is important to cultivate devotion by considering this physical representation to be the actual Buddha. This is especially the case when we go on pilgrimage. When we behold images of the Buddha, stupas, and volumes of scripture, we should cultivate devotion thinking that these are the actual Three Jewels, and practice the accumulations in this way.³

It is said that making a single prostration to a sacred object like a stupa, for example, generates great merit and great benefit. It is said that even if we cannot make a full prostration using both hands, we nonetheless generate great merit by raising only one hand in reverence. With this simple gesture alone, we acquire many causes for attainment of a rebirth in the higher realms. It is also said that we are certain to eventually attain liberation as a result of this deed. This is because, as an object of reverence, the Buddha⁴ is the most unsurpassable and excellent. It is said that even if we do not know how to purify ourselves through devotion, this practice is very beneficial and powerful because we still relate to the Buddha as the source for the accumulation of merit.

In our daily practices we pay homage based on the visualizations described in the texts we are reciting. Otherwise, if we have a Buddha statue or an image, we can cultivate faith in the Buddha based on this representation. As we visualize, we should think that the entire space is filled with buddhas and bodhisattvas and that they are actually present. We should also think that all sentient beings are paying homage to the buddhas and bodhisattvas along with us. In the Mahayana, we act for the benefit of both oneself and all others. This means that our practice should be intended to benefit all sentient beings, either directly or indirectly. Therefore, when practicing the seven branches we think of ourselves and all sentient beings all together. This is a brief, initial explanation of the practice of devotion.

I will now give a general explanation of the practice of the seven branches based on the text of the sutra itself. Since you have been reciting them regularly, you should already be familiar with the verses. The practice of devotion as it is mentioned in the text is explained by first paying homage with the body, speech, and mind together, and then each aspect individually. The text reads, “**in all the worlds throughout the ten directions**”⁵ which means, in brief, everywhere. The text says that we

prostrate to all of the buddhas residing in all worlds throughout the ten directions. They are the **lions among men**, who appear **in the three times**. This is a reference to the buddhas of the past, those of the present, and those who will arise in the future.

Why are buddhas called lions among men? Lions are known to be fearless when facing other wild animals. Since others cannot find fault in or oppose the body, speech, and mind of a buddha, buddhas are fearless as they cannot be defeated in any way. This is why they are referred to as lions among men. The term *buddha* (or *sang-gyé* in Tibetan) itself means they are completely free from all faults and possess all possible good qualities.⁶ Other names include “teachers of the path to liberation” and “those who are completely free from delusion”—all of these are synonyms of buddha. Regarding their number, **all, without exception, each**, and so forth are synonyms for *the entirety of buddhas*. The text also tells us to prostrate with the words **I bow with body, speech and mind**; in order to counteract our lack of faith, we bow **in reverence**.

Next, beginning with the physical, then followed by the verbal and mental, a more extensive explanation of the three modes of paying homage is given. The text states, **by the force of this aspiration for excellent conduct, all the victors appear before me in my mind**. Here, *excellent conduct* indicates the activity of the bodhisattvas. *Aspiration* here is synonymous with faith in or the intention to carry out the bodhisattva conduct. I perform the act of prostration through the force of faith in the conduct of the bodhisattvas.

Since it is difficult to meet the victors of the ten directions face to face, we cultivate the conviction that they are directly present before us. After that, our own **body** is also imagined as **multiplied to a number equal to atoms in the universe**. Saying this, think that however many billions of atoms exist in all the buddha fields, our body multiplies that many times. **Bow reverently** means that, from a place of deep faith, we prostrate in great reverence to all the victors. In other words, we imagine ourselves multiplied to a number equal to all the atoms in all buddha fields and, feeling confident that all of these bodies are actually present, we perform the prostrations.

As for mentally paying homage, the text says, **in every atom are as many buddhas as there are atoms**, and so forth. *Atom* indicates the smallest possible physical form. In each atom are buddhas in numbers equal to the number of atoms in the world, each one **surrounded by a vast retinue of bodhisattvas**, also known as the heirs of the buddhas. Just

as emptiness pervades the entire expanse of phenomena (*dharmadhātu*), we generate the conviction that all the worlds throughout endless space are filled with buddhas and bodhisattvas, and we mentally prostrate to them all with a heart full of devotion.

The third mode of homage is the verbal. The text describes **an inexhaustible ocean of praise**. Since the praises we offer to these buddhas are innumerable, they are said to be an inexhaustible ocean. In general, if someone were to try to enumerate the positive qualities of a buddha the list would be endless. This is not only because the individual good qualities of the buddhas are immeasurable; but also because even if we were to count them, there would never be an end to the counting. Even though we might move a few steps to the east, we cannot say that we are now further away from the western *direction* and closer to the eastern *direction*. Similarly, the good qualities of a buddha are said to be inexhaustible. And since there is no end to the good qualities of the buddha, the praises and exaltations that express them are like an inexhaustible ocean. And it is not that the words of the praise are just repeated again and again. **An ocean of various melodies** indicates that we use many different melodies that are pleasant and beautiful and so forth in order to **express the good qualities of all victors and praise all those gone to bliss**.

As we have seen, **many buddhas reside**, even in the smallest atom. Generally speaking, as we believe in the truth of notions like *small* and *big*, it's contradictory for our minds to imagine many large things being contained within a single small space. However, the notion of size is merely a mental construct. In reality, there is no large and small. When we are free of such concepts, it is possible for many large things to fit in a small space. At present we do not see this, but when we become a bodhisattva it will be possible to see many buddhas in the space of a single atom, and to emanate in the space of a single atom as many offering substances as there are atoms in the world. For example, we can see many kinds of worlds on a television. This is possible because the size of the objects we see is not real. Size is posited by the mind. *Large* is dependent on *small*, and *small* depends on *large*. The same applies to the notions of *good* and *bad*. When a foreign person arrives in a place like Nepal, they might think the place is very dirty. But if that person later comes to a place with even worse conditions, Nepal might start to seem like a good place. So, *good* and *bad* are decided by the mind. In the same way, size is also established conceptually. For example, we cannot say whether this incense stick is long or short; *long* depends on *short*, and *short* depends on

long. Likewise *big* and *small* are not decided in dependence on the objects themselves but rather through concepts. Therefore, even though the visualization we are presently discussing is based on conviction, we will be able to directly perceive things in this way in the future when we become great bodhisattvas.

Prostrations are performed as an antidote to pride. The Buddha ordained many of his senior disciples, like Upāli, who was a low-caste barber. Some time after Upāli's ordination, the Shākya king Aniruddha, who was a relative of the Buddha, also resolved to take monastic vows. According to the tradition, when taking these vows, a monk is required to prostrate, first to the abbot, then to the assistant preceptor, followed by the other monks attending the ceremony. When he came to Upāli, he recognized his barber from when he was king. He then asked the teacher, "Must I also prostrate to Upāli?" The Buddha responded, "When you take ordination you must prostrate for the sake of overcoming your pride." Lord Buddha was shown respect not only by gods and humans, but even by trees and flowers who bent down toward him. The reason for this is that in his previous lives as a bodhisattva, he paid homage to all who were worthy of respect, including followers of other spiritual traditions, as well as his parents, and so forth.

Generally speaking, all afflictions are very dangerous, but the worst amongst them is said to be pride. It makes us think we are superior to all, and we will look upon others with contempt. If we dwell on thoughts such as, "I must achieve this for myself" or "I am so good," the result will be that we will look down on and condemn others, which will cause us to suffer most of all. It is said that the karmic result of thinking with pride, "I am rich but she is poor," is to be poor in a future life. In the same way, if we arrogantly think, "I am beautiful, but he is not," this will later cause a displeasing body. So, do not act contemptuously toward others. This is, I think, the worst thing that one can do.

Therefore, when prostrating, we visualize in the space in front of ourselves the buddhas, bodhisattvas, hearers (*śrāvakas*), and solitary realizers (*pratyekabuddhas*). It is suitable to prostrate to all of these. Think that they are truly present there, and that oneself and all sentient beings are prostrating out of devotion with body, speech, and mind before that assembly. It should be noted that it is said to be a fault if we hunch over while prostrating. Instead, we should keep the body straight. It is also good to recite the verses of homage or repeat the refuge prayer while prostrating. These two are very meaningful.

OFFERINGS

The second branch is making offerings. The text reads **offering excellent flowers, beautiful garlands**, and so forth. Usually, in front of oneself are the three supports,⁷ the Buddha and so forth. In front of these is where the actual offerings—flowers, water, and so forth, whatever offerings we are able to make—should be placed. If we do not possess a Buddha image, we should still feel that we are making offerings to the Buddha. It is said that enormous benefit is accrued by offering flowers, or whatever we may be offering, in this way. If we offer even a single flower thinking of the Buddha, we will obtain many births in the higher realms. These kinds of flower offerings to the Buddha are very easy to make. In the past I asked Lama Lodrö,⁸ a greatly accomplished scholar, how to perform these offerings. He answered that simply thinking, “I offer this to the Buddha” would be sufficient.

If we have been able to prepare physical offerings, they can be offered. If not, we should do as explained below. If we are unable to make these mental kinds of offerings at first, we should familiarize ourselves with the practice again and again in order to increase our capacity to offer. Once we know how, we will be able to make offerings out of the innumerable outer objects that neither are in our possession nor in the possession of others, such as mountains, forests, flowers, rivers, and so forth. Likewise, when we find ourselves in places that belong to someone else, such as a garden where we see pleasant flowers and the like, we can use these objects as a support for our practice, imagining these flowers and gardens to fill the whole of space whilst thinking, “I offer this to the Buddha and all the retinue.” We should continuously think in this way, offering everything we have to the Buddha, including our own body and possessions, and our roots of virtue. Even when we enter a shop we can think that we offer all the good things we find there to the Buddha. It is certainly beneficial to think in that way.

In the root text, **flowers** indicates various kinds, like lotus flowers for example. The **beautiful garlands** are garlands of jewels. **Music** can be pleasant songs offered by singers, or the beautiful music produced by drums and other instruments, like lutes and guitars, and so forth. **Ointments** indicates oils for the body, pleasantly scented. **Parasols** are parasols fit for dignitaries, victory flags, and so on. For **excellent lamps** we can imagine offering many butter lamps and candles. We can also imagine offering electric lights, and particularly the light of the precious

sun and moon illuminating all of space. **Incense** indicates material offerings that, when burned, smell delightful. If these are not available they can be visualized. Feel that their smoke fills the sky like clouds. With all of these things, **make offerings to the assembly of victors**. Following these, we offer **beautiful garments** such as the finest cloth among gods and humans, in great quantities. **The best of scents** indicates fragrant materials and incense powder, that is, **heaps of finely scented powders piled high as a mountain**.

All of these are perfectly arranged, set up in the proper manner. With all of these, **I make offerings to the victors**. In these lines, the word *beautiful* appears many times. It indicates that the offerings are composed of outstanding materials, with marvelous shapes and colors, wonderful sounds, fragrant aromas, sweet tastes, soft to the touch. Therefore, they are referred to as “beautiful” and “excellent.”

The offerings made here are of two types, common and unsurpassable. The common offerings are what have been explained up to this point. **The vast and unsurpassable offerings** refer to the second type. These are the offerings that are magically emanated from the palm of each hand to fill the sky. You should feel with conviction that these objects have emanated individually and then have been mentally multiplied before being offered to the Buddha. The word *vast* indicates that these offerings of the bodhisattva have been multiplied to an extent that they fill the sky, forming a vast offering. We make these offerings with great faith and devotion **to all the victors**. **By the power of faith in excellent conduct** means that these vast quantities of excellent substances are offered to all the victors through the power of great faith in the conduct of the bodhisattvas. It is also said that offerings should be made with reverence and devotion. Even if we can only make a small offering, it is important to remember that this does not mean that we will only accumulate a small amount of virtue. A large amount is created by many small quantities coming together. In particular, it's said that any connection at all with the Buddha, however small, is meaningful and very beneficial.

CONFESSION

Confession is the third branch. It is said that all our current bodily discomfort and mental anguish arises from negative actions. It is certain that, as we accumulate a great number of these negative deeds, it can only result in suffering. However, the potential of these actions can be

neutralized through the practice of confession, making them powerless to produce results. A **misdeed** means engaging in a negative action. Any action on the part of our body, speech, or mind that arises from any of the three poisons—desire, aversion, and ignorance—is an unwholesome action. They are ten in number, divided into actions of body, speech, and mind. An example for a negative action of the body is taking life, such as killing an animal out of a desire for meat, or killing someone because we want their wealth. Killing out of aversion would be, for example, killing an enemy. Killing out of ignorance, for example, would be to kill an animal thinking that offering it to the gods is a meritorious deed. Because they are **caused by attachment, aversion, and ignorance**, performing any of these misdeeds is an unwholesome action. Here, the unwholesome, negative actions we have **performed through body, speech, and mind**; those we have exhorted others to perform, and those we rejoiced in are considered the same; we confess them all. We should therefore think, **“Whatever of these I have done, I confess each one of them.”** The practice of confessing, or more literally, “laying down” our negative deeds, has various aspects. First, it is important to regret the misdeeds we have committed in the past, thinking that it was wrong to have acted that way. Second, we should vow that, from now on, these actions will not be repeated even at the cost of our life. These two, regret and the resolution to abstain, are very important. If we do not regret the unwholesome deeds performed previously, we will continue to act in the same way, thinking such actions to be appropriate. With regret and determination not to repeat, however, we destroy the potential of these deeds and we will, from that moment on, not continue behaving in the same old negative ways.

In general, confession is a skillful method for purifying misdeeds. However, this does not mean that it will make us not commit any negative deeds again. We will still perform all kinds of positive and negative actions. While it is indeed important to make the resolution, “From now on I will not engage in harmful actions,” we should also know that, as beginners, we will unavoidably act in negative ways. However, we should nevertheless resolve to permanently abstain from these actions. It is like walking along a road. However much we might tumble and fall on the way, we will still want to get up and go further; we do not wish to stay wherever it is we happened to fall.

REJOICING

The fourth of the seven branches is rejoicing. The text reads, **All the victors of the ten directions and their heirs**, and so forth. Rejoicing means taking delight in the virtuous deeds of others with a mind that is free of jealousy. It is also important to rejoice in our own wholesome actions. If we think our own accumulation of virtue surpasses that of others, that is pride. Thinking that our past wholesome deeds are good, however, increases our accumulation of virtue. To rejoice in others' good deeds will make us happy. To be displeased with a person's virtuous deeds, however, will not only not cause them any harm, but constitutes a serious unwholesome act on our part. It is precisely this state of affliction that causes us distress in that very moment and we gather a negative deed that will harm us later as well. To rejoice in another's good deed, on the other hand, is very meritorious. In fact, by rejoicing in the wholesome deed of someone else, we will attain an equal amount of merit as the person who performed the action. In this way we can easily accumulate a lot of merit without having to perform the actions ourselves. The Buddha said that rejoicing is a skillful method for gathering the roots of virtue. This means that it allows us to accumulate powerful merit without much difficulty. Say, for example, we work hard to build a monastery. If someone sees that hard work and rejoices in it, that person will attain a similar degree of merit without needing to do any hard work themselves. Once we understand this, we can make a habit of constantly remembering any beneficial action done by others, however small it might be. We should also keep in mind occasions when we react negatively to seeing others' happiness on account of their virtuous actions. Making a habit of remembering these occasions, our minds start to change, improving step by step. The text reads, **All victors of the ten directions and their heirs**. We rejoice in the enlightened activities performed by all buddhas and, likewise, those of their bodhisattva heirs; those of the noble **solitary realizers** (*pratyekabuddhas*), the noble hearers (*śravakas*) **training on the path** (which includes the stream-enterers, once returners, and non-returners) and of arhats **beyond training**, and, along with all these, of **all other sentient beings**. **We rejoice** in whatever merit is accumulated by the four types of noble beings (*ārya*),⁹ as well as by all others, that is, humans and gods and so forth, cultivating joy toward all these good actions.

The term *victor* is one of the many epithets of the buddhas, referring to their victory over the afflictions. It would be good if all these epithets were to be made available in English. There are two categories of beings following the Buddha: the bodhisattvas, referred to as the Buddha's heirs, and the disciples, who are his followers practicing the Lesser Vehicle. Just as an individual of royal ancestry can be called an heir to the king, bodhisattvas are known as heirs because they hold the Buddha's lineage. Hearers are referred to as disciples of the Buddha, not as his heirs, because they are not born in the lineage of the Buddha and can therefore not perform the function of the Buddha's regent and so forth. *Solitary realizer* is the name given to the noble arhats who appear in the time after a previous buddha's teachings has vanished and before the coming of the next buddha. They display many supernatural powers, and their deeds are of great benefit to sentient beings.¹⁰ The words *those in training* and *those beyond training* refer to the four types of noble beings among the hearers as explained above. These are all part of the Buddha's retinue, and they appear throughout the ten directions.

In terms of the usual enumeration of the three vehicles, we speak of the Great Vehicle of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and of the Lesser Vehicle of the solitary realizers and the hearers in training and beyond training. These are called the three vehicles (of bodhisattvas, solitary realizers, and hearers). There is another enumeration of the three vehicles as the Great Vehicle, the Lesser Vehicle, and the Vehicle of Secret Mantra. Chögyal Phagpa¹¹ referred to the latter as the uncommon enumeration of the three vehicles, but this is not well-known. So, two explanations should be given: one of the three common vehicles and the other of the three uncommon vehicles. Stated briefly, we can speak of the three common vehicles as the hearers, solitary realizers, and buddhas, and the uncommon vehicles as the Lesser Vehicle, Great Vehicle, and Vehicle of Secret Mantra.

REQUEST TO TURN THE WHEEL OF DHARMA

Next comes the fifth branch: requesting that the wheel of Dharma be turned. For seven weeks after attaining full enlightenment, Śākyamuni Buddha remained without teaching. After that, having been implored to teach by his students, he turned the Dharma wheel. In our practice, we request the buddhas who have not yet begun to teach the Dharma to do

so. It is said that, only after being requested to, do the buddhas teach the Dharma, and also that the listeners acquire the merit needed to hear a buddha utter words of Dharma. At present, we are not able to meet the Buddha directly, but, as we have already discussed, there are innumerable buddhas throughout the ten directions. When we recite these words, it is important to think with conviction, that we are requesting those buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma. Having presented whatever offerings we have to the buddhas, together with all sentient beings we request them to teach us. The most important, amongst the many deeds the buddhas perform for the benefit of beings, is teaching the Dharma. When disciples to whom the dharma is taught hear, contemplate, and meditate on the teachings, they can attain liberation and omniscience. For that reason, the greatest benefit a buddha can offer sentient beings is to teach the Dharma. This is why it is so important to request the buddhas to teach. On top of this, to request our own spiritual teachers to explain us the Dharma for the benefit of ourselves and other beings is said to be tremendously beneficial.

The texts then goes on, **You who are like lamps for the worlds in the ten directions** and so forth. The phrase *you who like lamps* and so on, basically means “whoever is a buddha,” which in turn means “all buddhas.” *Worlds in the ten directions* indicates that they are lamps for the beings in all worlds in the ten directions. The buddhas are likened to lamps because, just as a lamp is lit in order to dispel darkness, the buddhas teach the Dharma in order to dispel the ignorance of sentient beings.

The buddhas have progressed along the **stages of awakening to attain buddhahood, free from attachment**. This line explains the method they have used to attain buddhahood. Progressing gradually along the stages of the path, they have attained that state by giving up all attachment, including attachment to the final attainment of buddhahood itself. In short, the stages of awakening indicate that the result, the attainment of full buddhahood, occurs only after someone has progressed gradually along the various paths. The text then says, **I request all you protectors, the buddhas, to set in motion the unsurpassable wheel**. *Wheel* indicates the Dharma. *Unsurpassable* indicates that this wheel is unsurpassed and cannot be set in motion by others. To put it another way, this line means that we entreat the buddhas from the bottom of our hearts to kindly teach us the Dharma which is extraordinary and unlike any other teaching.

REQUESTING THE BUDDHAS TO REMAIN

The sixth branch is the request for the buddhas not to pass into nirvana. When Śākyamuni Buddha conceived the intention to pass into nirvana, a lay devotee beseeched him to remain for a long time. In response to this request, the Buddha extended his life. In the same way, in the realms of the ten directions are many buddhas who have the intention to pass into nirvana. These are the buddhas we request not to enter this state of cessation, but to continue to work for the benefit of sentient beings for a long time. Again, we should practice with firm conviction, thinking that oneself and all sentient beings really present offerings and make this request. When we do this, it is said that we will gain tremendous merit since the buddhas will not pass beyond but will instead continue to work for the benefit of beings.

The text explains, **to you who display the intent to pass into nirvana**. We make this request to those buddhas who have the intention of displaying the activity of passing into nirvana. The purpose of this request and the purpose for the buddhas to remain is expressed with the words, **for the benefit and happiness of all beings**. Generally speaking, *benefit* indicates ultimate happiness, that is to say the attainment of liberation and omniscience, and *happiness* the temporary happiness of the higher realms. It is for sentient beings to obtain this benefit and happiness that the buddhas must remain with us. **Please remain for as many eons as there are atoms in the buddha fields**. This line answers the question: How long should the buddhas remain? We request them to remain for as many eons as there are atoms in all the buddha fields in the universe. The one making the request says, **With my palms joined, I beseech you**, which means that the request is expressed with deep reverence.

DEDICATION

The last of the seven branches is dedication. The words expressing the intention that any virtue accumulated should become a cause for a specific result are called *dedication*. For example, when there is something you would like to give to someone and you think, “I’m going to give this thing to this boy,” you have dedicated your giving to that boy. In the same way, when we accumulate virtue and think we do it for a specific purpose, we dedicate our virtue to this aim. If, however, we do not dedicate the virtue like so, the deed is rendered incomplete as a condition for achieving the

desired result. Whether or not the result is attained depends on whether or not the necessary causes and conditions are completely present. Whatever virtue has been accumulated with the thought, “May this be a cause for attaining buddhahood for the benefit of other beings,” that virtue will not degenerate. Virtue created in such a way will increase and, taken together with other virtues, will ultimately be a cause for the attainment of the state of buddhahood. However, if we do not dedicate the virtue to achieving the state of buddhahood and we then later become angry, its potential will be destroyed. Likewise, holding wrong views or beliefs, thinking that there is no Buddha or that the Dharma is not true, and so forth, can also destroy our accumulated virtue. But if we have dedicated these wholesome deeds for the sake of buddhahood their potential cannot be harmed by such views and actions.

As for the method of performing dedication: if we dedicate our virtues entirely for the purpose of happiness in this life, or for avoiding lower rebirths and attaining higher births, then they will be exhausted and will cease once they have produced the desired result. Likewise, if we dedicate for the purpose of attaining the liberation of the Lesser Vehicle, the virtues will cease when that liberation is attained. The virtues dedicated for the purpose of attaining buddhahood, however, will not only produce happiness in this life and in future lives, but they will be inexhaustible even when the aspired result of buddhahood is achieved, so long as space remains and samsara is not emptied.

Now, if we dedicate the roots of virtue accumulated through small actions, like having offered even a single flower to the Buddha, or having taken only a few steps toward a place for the purpose of studying the Dharma, these deeds will become very beneficial. And, depending on how often we dedicate them, they will become increasingly beneficial and good. If we dedicate a wholesome deed one hundred or one thousand times, this particular root of virtue will become increasingly beneficial.

Regarding the roots of virtue that are dedicated, the text says **paying homage, making offerings, confessing, rejoicing, earnestly requesting the turning of the wheel of Dharma, and requesting to remain** for a long period of time. These six are the roots of virtue, each of which is said to be a very powerful wholesome deed. **Whatever small amount of virtue I have accumulated, I dedicate all of it,** and so forth. This is saying that all those roots of virtue brought forth by the practice of the seven branches, we dedicate toward supreme, perfect awakening. This means that we dedicate this for the purpose of attaining buddhahood for

the benefit of others. And with regard to the person making the dedication, the text says, **I dedicate** and so forth. Whenever we accumulate some virtue, we should conclude in that way and recite these words from the prayer: **Whatever small amount of virtue I have accumulated, I dedicate all of it for the purpose of enlightenment.** It is crucial to perform the dedication by clearly recollecting the details of the good deeds we have performed and the purpose we are dedicating them to. This is the most important thing. For those who may have amassed vast stores of virtue, but did not know how to perform a proper dedication in this way, we can dedicate with the verse: “Whatever small amount of virtue I and others have accumulated, I dedicate all of it to the great enlightenment.” This wish that all roots of virtue accumulated by myself and others become a cause for the attainment of buddhahood for myself and others will also benefit others.

So, these are the seven branches. They are said to serve as ways of both accumulating virtue and purifying negative deeds. Thereby, our virtues are accumulated, purified, and increased. This practice gathers virtues previously not accumulated, develops those already present, and purifies our negative deeds. Four of the seven branches serve to accumulate new virtue: paying homage, offerings, requesting the wheel of Dharma to be turned, and the request to remain without passing into nirvana. Rejoicing and dedication increase virtues already present, while confession purifies negative deeds. This is how the seven branches are explained as acting to accumulate, increase, and purify. Because of this, they are vitally important. Since this prayer was spoken by the Buddha, it is very beneficial to recite it with our regular prayers and practices. It would be very good to recite it at least three times every day. We can also turn each of these seven branches into an individual practice. When we do this, it is excellent to dedicate the virtue of each single repetition of whichever branch we chose to focus on. When performing prostrations for instance, we would dedicate the virtue of each single prostration.

In addition to these seven branches, the Dharma practice of ten branches adds three practices to the seven branches already explained: going for refuge, aspiration bodhicitta, and applied bodhicitta, which are also included in the seven branch practice according to the Vajrayāna.

GOING FOR REFUGE

To conclude this teaching I will give a brief summary of the practice of going for refuge. First, the cause must be explained. For barley shoots to become mature crops, all the necessary causes and conditions need to be present. At the same time, there must be an absence of adverse conditions. Only then will they be able to definitely produce the desired result. Going for refuge is something similar. To produce the resultant state of going for refuge, we must necessarily prepare its causes. On the other hand, if we don't work on its causes, the thought that we need to take refuge will never occur to us. There are said to be two such causes for going for refuge: fear and faith. For the former, two things should be contemplated: distress with regard to all the difficulties and pains in this life, and terror with regard to births in the lower realms in the future. When we realize that we lack the capacity to overcome these difficulties by ourselves, we will accept the fact that we need to rely on someone else. First of all, however, we should frequently contemplate these difficulties. When we find ourselves unable to bear even the thought of all these sufferings, we will want to eliminate them once and for all, even though neither we ourselves, nor others can do anything about the situation. At that time we realize that only the Three Jewels are able to help. This trust that the Three Jewels can indeed offer us the help we need is called *faith*. It is cultivated by first recollecting the different types of fear mentioned above.

The objects to whom we go for refuge are the Three Jewels. Of these, the Jewel that is the Buddha possesses limitless good qualities, among which his ability to teach the path to liberation is the most important for us. It is due to this ability that it is impossible for a buddha to make mistakes in accomplishing the aims of sentient beings. The Jewel of Dharma is the Dharma taught by the Buddha. When we practice it, we are able to be completely freed from all types of problems, and attain the states of liberation and buddhahood. That is the Buddhadharma. There are many scholars in the world, but apart from the Buddha, none are able to teach the path that is completely unerring. Likewise, there are many teachings in the world. While many of them can indeed benefit beings, none apart from the Dharma enable us to abandon samsara entirely and to be able to completely cut off the stream of suffering. The term *liberation* indicates unending bliss, a type of happiness that cannot be interrupted. No other tradition apart from the Dharma taught by the Buddha allows us to attain this liberation. Why is that? The suffering of samsara arises

from actions; these actions arise from afflictions, which in turn arise from the belief in a self, in self-grasping. In order to eliminate this self-grasping there needs to be the teachings on selflessness, and this does not exist anywhere apart from the tradition of the “teacher of selflessness”, that is, the Buddha. If we do not meditate on selflessness, suffering will never cease. Because of this, the only means which is able to completely eliminate the suffering of samsara is that Dharma which has been taught by the Buddha.

The third Jewel is the Sangha. *Sangha* refers to those who practice the Dharma as taught by the Buddha. In the Lesser Vehicle, or Hinayana, there are the stream enterers, once-returners, non-returners, and arhats. These are the ārya, or noble beings, of the Hinayana. In the Great Vehicle or Mahayana, *Sangha* refers to the bodhisattvas. When followers of the Lesser Vehicle go for refuge, the Jewel of Dharma refers to the Hinayana Dharma and the Jewel of Sangha refers to the hearers. When going for refuge according to the tradition of the Great Vehicle, the Jewel of Dharma is not the Hinayana Dharma but the Tripiṭaka of the Mahayana, and the Sangha are the bodhisattvas. It is certainly suitable for followers of the Mahayana to prostrate to the śrāvaka arhats and to make offerings to them, but they are not their objects of refuge. Why should this be so? The term *Dharma* should refer to the path someone progresses along. Those following the Mahayana do not take the Dharma of the Lesser Vehicle as their path, they rely on the Mahayana Dharma. In the same way, *Sangha* should refer to the companions who help us to accomplish our chosen path. The only companions who able to help us practice the path of the bodhisattvas are the bodhisattva themselves.

Regarding the manner of going for refuge: When we travel to an unknown country, we need three things: someone to show the path to get there, the path itself, and companions to help on the path. In the same way, if we wish to travel out of this cycle of suffering and achieve liberation and the state of buddhahood, we require the same three things: someone to teach us the path, the path itself, and traveling companions. This is why our objects of refuge are the Three Jewels. We think of the Buddha as the teacher who shows the path; of the Dharma taught by the Buddha as the path itself; and of the bodhisattvas as the companions who help us along the path. Taking this approach is referred to as going for refuge.

Translated by Daniel McNamara.

5. TRANSFORMING OUR MINDS: THE FOUR MIND CHANGING CONTEMPLATIONS AND OTHER PRACTICES

1. Chapter 7, verse 14. The whole verse reads: Relying on the boat that is the human body, cross over the great river of suffering! Since it is difficult to find this boat again in the future, oh fool, do not spend your time in sleep.
2. Chapter 7, verse 7. The whole verse reads: Since death will come quickly, until then gather the accumulations [of merit and wisdom]! Even if you abandon laziness at that time, it will be too late, so what would you do?
3. Derge Kangyur vol. 46, p. 88a2.
4. *Letter to a Friend*, v. 104. The whole verse reads: If your head or clothes were to catch fire, do not pause to extinguish it! Rather, exert effort to stop future rebirth. There is no purpose superior to this.
5. The three realms are the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm.
6. The Tibetan term (*nges 'byung*) that is here translated as “spiritual resolution,” is generally translated as “renunciation,” but the meaning is the determination to achieve liberation from samsara.
7. This means that all sentient beings always experience the three kinds of suffering (i.e., the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and the all-pervasive suffering of compoundedness).
8. In samsara, there is no true or genuine happiness that is uncontaminated by mental afflictions.

6. RECOLLECTING THE THREE JEWELS

1. The Tibetan term *mdo* means “to abbreviate” or “bring together”.
2. Vajrayāna deity recitation practices.

7. THE SEVEN-BRANCH PRACTICE BASED ON SAMANTABHADRA'S ASPIRATION FOR EXCELLENT CONDUCT

1. Words and phrases which have been quoted from the text are left in bold. This is intended to make it easy for the reader to distinguish between commentary and quote.
2. The hands, the knees, and the head.
3. This generally refers to the accumulations of merit and wisdom through which enlightenment is attained.
4. The stupa represents the mind of the Buddha.
5. The cardinal and intermediate directions along with above and below.
6. The Tibetan word for buddha is “sang-gyé” (*sangs rgyas*), which literally means “purified [and] developed.”

7. This refers to the three supports that should be present on shrines: a buddha image representing the enlightened body, a scripture representing enlightened speech, and a stupa representing enlightened mind.
8. This might refer to Lodrö Gyaltzen (*blo gros rgyal mtshan*), an abbot of Dzongsar who passed away in the 1960s.
9. These are: stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner, and arhat.
10. While they do not teach the Dharma through speech, pratyekabuddhas are able to indicate impermanence and other fundamental tenets through their miraculous powers such as creating illusions in the sky.
11. Drogön Chögyal Phagpa (1235-1280) was one of the five founding figures of the Sakya tradition.

8. CULTIVATING A HEART OF WISDOM: ORAL INSTRUCTIONS ON THE MIND TRAINING IN SEVEN POINTS

1. Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, one of founding figures of the Sakya tradition, received these instructions in visions directly from the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.
2. The seven are: 1. Preliminaries; 2. Main practice; 3. Turning negative circumstances into the path; 4. The practice of one life condensed; 5. Evaluating one's mind training; 6. The commitments of the mind training; 7. The precepts of mind training.
3. *Renunciation* renders the Tibetan *ngé-jung*, which literally translates as *definite emergence*. It is the positive state of mind of longing for liberation from suffering, resulting from disenchantment with the bondage of samsara and its suffering.
4. In his *Bhāvanākrama* 2 and 3, Kamalaśīla mentions the importance of correct breathing as a prerequisite for calm abiding meditation. See for instance Dalai Lama 2003:106.
5. This thought does not abide anywhere separately from emptiness. In other words, emptiness is the very nature of this thought too.
6. The Tibetan terms are *ngo bo* (essence), *gnas lugs* (actual condition) and *rang bzhin* (nature).
7. In general, one speaks of six types of main minds related to the six faculties. According to the tradition of the Cittamātra school, there are eight main minds, the previous six plus the afflicted mind (*kliṣṭāmanas*) and the all-base consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*).
8. In other words, it is the cognitive clarity of the mind which does not yet apprehend any object.
9. The four extreme views are the ways in which the mind apprehends its objects, conceiving them either as existent, as non-existent, as both existent and non-existent, or as being neither existent nor non-existent.
10. These seven steps subsume the practice of the entire Mahayana path. They are: 1. seeing all beings as one's dear mother; 2. recalling their kindness; 3. the wish to repay their kindness; 4. generating great love; 5. generating great compassion; 6.