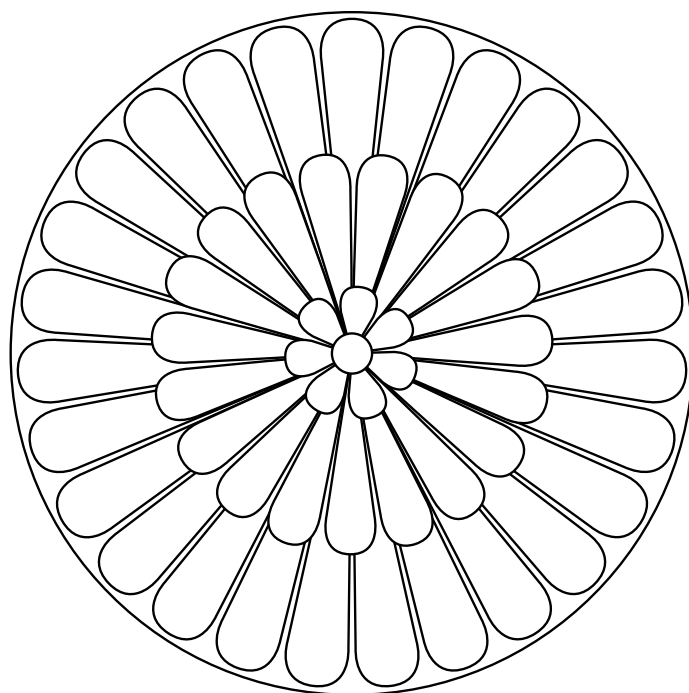


What To Do at India's Buddhist Holy Sites



by

DJKN



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PART ONE: THE JOURNEY

Buddhist Holy Sites

The tradition of going on pilgrimage is a practice that's been encouraged by all the great religions of the world for millennia. It has become popular partly because it's an opportunity for spiritual seekers to take the kind of holiday that combines having fun with virtuous action. For most of us, the idea of travelling to exotic places is far more appealing than some of the more austere practices our traditions advocate, and while the pursuit of pleasure shouldn't be the only reason for going on a pilgrimage, it's a very effective carrot for inducing materialistic Buddhists like myself to do any practice at all. And a pilgrimage is also something we can accomplish relatively simply, which is encouraging.

Generally, the purpose of a spiritual pilgrimage is to visit somewhere 'holy'. Where and what 'holy' is, though, changes depending on the spiritual tradition and approach being followed. For some religions, a place is considered holy because a Messiah was born or murdered there; or a nail or piece of wood is holy because a saint blessed it. From a Buddhist point of view, a person, an object or even a moment in time is described as being 'holy' when it's not stained or defiled by human greed and aggression, or more importantly, by a judgemental and dualistic mind. Therefore, strictly speaking, there's no need for any of us to seek out external holy places or holy people because, as Lord Buddha himself promised, "Whoever thinks of me, I am in front of them". Therefore, the moment we think of or feel devotion for the Buddha or his teachings, where we are he will be right there with us, and that place will become holy.

The problem most of us face, though, is that however many times we're told this, our 'clever', pessimistic and sceptical minds simply won't buy it, which makes us quite unlike Ben of Kongpo. Ben was one of those rare individuals—a sublime being with a great wealth of merit and absolute trust—whose simplicity and pure devotion effortlessly eliminated the boundaries of conditioned perception. Throughout his life he had heard stories about the famous Jowo Rinpoche in Lhasa (a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha that's still considered to be one of the holiest images in Tibet) and after years of longing, finally made the long journey from Kham to see the great Rinpoche for himself.

For once, the day Ben arrived at the temple where the statue was housed there was no one around and he was able to walk right up to Jowo Rinpoche, who he liked immediately, and gaze into his smiling, golden face. Then Ben noticed the offerings and butter lamps surrounding this very nice lama, and couldn't think what they were there for. Perhaps, he thought, the tormas and melted butter were the lama's food, and that, to be polite, he should share his meal. So Ben helped himself to a large torma which he dipped in the butter and ate with relish.

Next, Ben decided he should do some circumambulations. The problem was, though, that he would have to take off his boots and didn't know where he could leave them to keep them safe. Perhaps, he thought, the nice lama will look after them for me, and he dropped his boots at Jowo Rinpoche's feet before starting his *kora*. A little later the caretaker of the temple returned and was horrified when he saw the oldest, dirtiest, most disreputable pair of boots sitting at the feet of Jowo Rinpoche. He hurried over to remove them, but much to his astonishment, as he bent down to pick them up, Jowo Rinpoche said, "Don't throw those boots away! Kongpo Ben has entrusted them to me!"

Eventually, it was time for Ben to leave, so he returned to the nice lama, thanked him for taking care of his boots and invited Jowo Rinpoche to visit his home in Kongpo. Without hesitation the statue replied, "I'll



come". According to Patrul Rinpoche, Jowo Rinpoche visited Ben and his wife the following year, after which he dissolved into a rock near their home that is now said to be as holy as the Jowo Rinpoche in Lhasa.

There are many stories like simple-minded Ben's, about people whose devotion was such that their one-pointed longing actually created holy places, or even invoked the material presence of holy beings into their own perceptions. Like Lodro, for example, who felt tremendous devotion for the bodhisattva Mañjushri. One evening, he came across an amazing passage in a book he was reading about how Mañjushri had vowed three times to show himself to anyone who travelled to Mount Panchashisha¹. For Lodro this was the most wonderful and inspiring discovery, and he became so excited that, after a sleepless night and without eating breakfast, he ran to his master's house to ask his permission and blessings to visit the mountain. At first Lodro's master did his best to convince him that such a journey, fraught with danger and hardship, was entirely unnecessary, but Lodro would not be convinced. Again and again he begged his master to allow him to go, until eventually he gave in and agreed.

In those days travelling was difficult, but Lodro, undaunted by the dangers that lay ahead, packed enough food and medicine for several months onto the back of his donkey, waved goodbye to his master, family and all his friends, and set off across the Tibetan plateau.

The terrain was extremely tough. He had to cross several fast flowing rivers and survive the punishing heat of empty deserts where his only companions were venomous snakes and wild animals. Nevertheless, after several months, Lodro arrived safely at Mount Panchashisha and immediately started searching for Mañjushri. He looked everywhere, again and again, but couldn't find anyone who even vaguely resembled the bodhisattva. Then, one evening as he rested his back against the cold iron steps of a monastery he fell fast asleep.

The next thing he remembered was walking into a lively bar where a boisterous crowd of locals were drinking, laughing and having fun. It was late and Lodro was tired. He asked for a room, and the enormously fat Madame who sat behind a small desk at one end of the main corridor told him they were full up, but he could sleep in a corner of the corridor if he wanted to. He accepted gratefully and pulled a book out of his luggage to read before he went to sleep.

Before long a rowdy gang of Chinese boys burst out of the bar into the corridor and started making fun of the fat Madame. Lodro tried to ignore them, but the leader caught sight of him and swaggered over to examine him.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Not quite knowing what to say, Lodro, in his innocence, found himself telling the Chinese boy about Mañjushri's vow. The boy laughed and laughed.

"You Tibetans, you're so superstitious! Why is that?" he cried. "And you actually believe what you read in books! I've lived here all my life, and I've never heard of anyone called Mañjushri." Shaking his head in disbelief he turned back to his friends, saying, "Winter's coming. You should go home before you freeze to death."

The whole gang then staggered back into the bar for another drink as the Madame and Lodro exchanged a look of relief.

A few days later, on his way back from another futile trek up the mountain, Lodro bumped into the same Chinese boy.

"You still here?" exclaimed the boy.

"Alright, I give up," replied Lodro, with a wan smile. "You were right, I am too superstitious."

"So, you've finally had enough, have you?" crowed the Chinese boy. "Will you go home now?"

"I thought I'd make a pilgrimage to Mongolia," said Lodro. "I might as well, it's on the way home. And it'll mean this journey wasn't a complete waste of time."

Lodro looked sad and there was something about the way his shoulders slumped as he spoke that softened the Chinese boy's heart.

¹ Also known as Mount Wu Tai Shan.



“I tell you what,” he said, slightly less aggressively than before. “You don’t have much money and you’ve run out of supplies, so you’re going to need some help. I have a friend in Mongolia. I’ll write him a letter. If you deliver it to him I’m sure he’ll do what he can.”

The next day, Lodro once again packed everything he had onto his old donkey and, feeling depressed and disheartened, took one last look at Mañjushri’s mountain, hoping desperately that Mañjushri might appear at least long enough to wave him goodbye. But no. The crowds of people rushing to and fro before him gave up nothing but the Chinese boy with the letter he’d promised. Lodro thanked him, tucked the letter into his yak skin coat and left for Mongolia.

After several months Lodro reached the town where the Chinese boy’s friend was supposed to live. Waving the letter in his hand, he stopped everyone he met to ask where the recipient of the letter might be found. To his surprise, every single person he approached burst out laughing. Lodro was extremely puzzled. Eventually he met an old woman who managed to control herself long enough to ask if she could read the letter. Lodro gave it to her, without reading it himself. She studied it carefully, then asked,

“Who wrote this letter?”

And Lodro told her the whole story. She shook her head and sighed, “Those young men are always bullying helpless pilgrims like you. But there is one creature I know of who bears the name written in this letter. If you really want to deliver it, go to the rubbish tip at the edge of the village. There you’ll find a pig. He’s very fat so you can’t miss him.”

Lodro was a little baffled by this information, nevertheless he decided that, as he was already so close he would go to the tip and have a look at the pig. Before long, he found a huge hill of rubbish on top of which sat an extremely large and rather hairy pig. Feeling a little self-conscious, Lodro unrolled the letter and held it in front of the pig’s small, bright eyes and was completely astounded when the pig appeared to read it. Once he’d finished, the pig started weeping uncontrollably and fell down dead. Suddenly curious about what could possibly have had such a strong effect on the animal, Lodro finally read the letter.

Dharma Arya Bodhisattva,

Your mission to benefit beings in Mongolia has been accomplished. Now hurry back to Mount Panchashisha.

Mañjushri

Amazed and reinvigorated, Lodro rushed back to Mount Panchashisha with just one thought in his mind, “This time, when I meet Mañjushri, I’m going to hold onto him extremely tightly and I’ll never let him go!”

His first stop back on the mountain was the bar where the Madame had given him shelter. Lodro asked her if she’d seen the Chinese boy.

“Those boys are always on the move. Who knows where they’ll be?” she said.

Lodro’s heart sank.

“But you’re tired,” continued the Madame, a little more gently. “Why don’t you sleep now. You can look for the boys tomorrow.” And she offered him his old place in the corridor. He fell asleep quickly, only to wake with a start to find himself slumped against the steps of the monastery and freezing cold. There was no sign of the Madame, the bar or the town. Physically he was on Mount Panchashisha, the external realm where Mañjushri is said to live, yet his merit had been such that his experiences of Mañjushri had all taken place in a dream. I’ve always hoped that Lodro finally realized that Mañjushri’s compassion is so immense and all-pervasive that it’s possible to invoke his presence absolutely anywhere—even his home town. And from that point of view, his journey to China had been unnecessary, but it definitely wasn’t a waste, because if Lodro had not made his pilgrimage he probably wouldn’t have experienced this inner journey, or realized anything at all.

After I heard this story from Deshung Rinpoche, I visited Mount Panchashisha several times, but had even less success than Lodro. Not only did I completely fail to invoke Mañjushri’s presence, I didn’t have any dreams



at all. The only thing that happened was I got annoyed by the ticketing system that's been instituted at most of the temples and by the monks who sold the tickets. Most of all I was extremely disappointed to see holy shrines reduced to the status of national monuments. Later, though, my intellectual mind began to wonder if one of those arrogant, acquisitive monks who could only think about the amount of tickets they were selling, was in fact Mañjushri. Who knows?

Two and a half thousand years after Lord Buddha passed into parinirvana, present-day Buddhist practitioners are able to visit places like Bodhgaya where our teacher became enlightened, and Varanasi where he taught, as well as all the other Buddhist holy sites that even two hundred years ago were virtually unknown. We encourage each other and ourselves by retelling the stories about what happened there, and most of them are comforting, inspiring and often picturesque. But not all holy places have such uplifting histories.

By the middle of the third century B.C.E., King Ashoka had taken control of much of India after many of years of war and bloodshed, but when the rulers of Kalinga (present day Orissa) refused to submit to his will, he sent the largest invasion force in Indian history to annihilate the local armies. More than one hundred thousand soldiers were slaughtered and their families scattered in all directions as Ashoka won his greatest ever victory, leaving a scene of devastation behind him comparable to that of Hiroshima after the bomb was dropped at the end of World War II.

As the great King surveyed the vast piles of broken bodies that were strewn across the bloody battlefield, a sudden realization of just how much suffering and terror he was responsible for flooded his mind, and at last he was able to reap the sadness of his violent actions. His regret was so profound that it led him to become a follower of Lord Buddha's teachings—one of the most famous conversions in Buddhist history—and he dedicated the rest of his life to propagating the Buddhadharma throughout his empire. Today, for those who aspire to practise *ahimsa* (the practice of non-violence), this terrible battlefield has become a truly inspiring holy place.

Sarnath has become a well-known and revered holy site because it was where Buddha and his five disciples first discussed the Four Noble Truths. This teaching has since been taught all over Asia, and strongly influenced kings, politicians and scholars in lands as far away as China, Japan and Myanmar. The Four Noble Truths are so visionary and universally relevant that they are now beginning to enter the minds and hearts of spiritual seekers and scholars in the West. As a result, the eyes of millions have been opened to the truth of the Buddha's words, their minds changed and their lives entirely transformed.

While a 'holy site' is a relative notion, Buddha said, in an expression of the absolute truth that can be found in *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's 'Aspiration To Good Actions'*,

Through the power of this prayer, aspiring to Good Action,
All the victorious ones appear, vivid here before my mind
And I multiply my body as many times as atoms in the universe,
Each one bowing in prostration to all the buddhas.

In every atom preside as many buddhas as there are atoms,
And around them, all their bodhisattva heirs:
And so I imagine them filling
Completely the entire space of reality.²

2 From *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's 'Aspiration To Good Actions'*, translation copyright Rigpa Translations 1996.



According to this prayer, there are as many buddhas in each atom of phenomenal existence as there are atoms in the universe, which means we can't discount the possibility that a buddha is currently living in the centre of Sanlitun in Beijing or the Bois de Boulogne in Paris. Actually, it's not just a possibility, it's a one hundred percent certainty. Yet, since the majority of people's minds are so rigid, it's extremely unlikely that anyone visiting such a place will be able to perceive the buddhas amongst them.

Generally, the popular notion of a 'holy' place tends to be rather opulent and almost entirely static. We're not used to the flexibility and openness of mind that come with a truly immense View; instead we get stuck with all the social norms and expectations we've grown up with. For most of us, a holy place should be quiet and clean and orderly, not hot, dusty, noisy, infested with flies, and stinking to high heaven. Nevertheless, places like Bodhgaya and Varanasi, which are entirely chaotic, continue to be revered as being authentically holy. We shouldn't ever forget that two and a half millennia ago (when the borders between Nepal and India were far less precise than they are today), Shakyamuni Buddha chose to be born in ancient India and that another nine-hundred and ninety-nine buddhas will be born there in the future, which is the main reason most people consider that area to be a far holier than spotless Switzerland, for example.

Buddhist holy sites are not only those places associated with the life of Shakyamuni Buddha, for example, where he was born, became enlightened, taught, and passed into parinirvana. There are many others related to all the other buddhas, disciples, arhats and bodhisattvas of our time. During the golden age of Buddhism, great masters taught all over Asia, in Turkestan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, China, Tibet and Nepal, not to mention India. Over the centuries, though, some of these countries have lost their connection with Buddhadharma, and although it's still possible to visit their holy places, they are barely recognisable and often politically unstable and dangerous.

Tantric Buddhism offers us amazing descriptions of holy sites and shrines in as many as fifty-six³ places throughout the world, as well as various hidden holy sites, like the Shambhala Kingdom, that aren't limited to a single geographical location. These hidden lands were discovered by the great tantric masters of the past and they have subsequently become places where people dedicate their entire lives to practise. Historically, it wasn't unusual for fervent Buddhist students to sacrifice their homes, families, jobs and all their worldly possessions so they could relocate to a hidden land. Some have become quite well-known, like Tashi Ding in Sikkim and Pemakö on the border between China and India.

The ancient holy sites in India and throughout the Himalayan region have been blessed again and again by buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout the ages, and have been visited by millions of pilgrims; this is what makes them so vibrantly alive and profoundly affecting. These holy sites have not been organized or controlled by anyone. No one is choreographing a 'holy site experience' and there's no serious exploitation, which means that, so far, they are free from any trace of a 'Disneyland' mentality. It's still possible to sit by the river Ganges in the afternoon to watch the cremation ceremonies, smell burning human flesh, and be enthralled by the continuous round of Vedic chanting, as if nothing has changed for 3,000 years.

Generally speaking, the environment we inhabit affects the way we think and the way we look at our surroundings. It's worth remembering that, of all the billions of planets Shakyamuni Buddha could have been born on he chose ours; and of the hundreds of countries that make up our world he chose ancient India, and of all places he could have attained enlightenment he chose the Indian state of Bihar. At first glance, Bihar doesn't appear to be either serene or spiritual—in fact quite the opposite. But once you arrive at Bodhgaya, for example, and especially when you enter the inner circle, you can immediately feel that it's really a very special place. Or Vulture's Peak, which is so tiny that you can walk past it in ten paces and when looked at through the eyes of a real estate developer is a social desert, yet it's where Lord Buddha gave some of his important teachings to hundreds of monks, arhats and bodhisattvas.

3 Known as the 'twenty-four shrines and thirty-two sacred places'.



Just before the Buddha passed into parinirvana his close disciples asked him, “As Buddhists, what should we tell the world about you?” Buddha then gave them a great deal of advice, including four specific pieces of information for the benefit of his own students as well as all sentient beings.

“You must tell the world that an ordinary person, Siddhartha, came to this earth, achieved enlightenment, taught the path to enlightenment, and didn’t become immortal but passed into parinirvana.”

To put it in another way, he taught that:

- although sentient beings are defiled and therefore ordinary, we all have buddha nature;
- our defilements are temporary, not our ultimate nature, and are therefore removable—as a result we can become buddhas;
- there is a path that shows us how to remove our defilements and attain enlightenment; and
- by following this path we will attain liberation from all extremes.

The Buddha’s teachings offer a variety of methods to help us remember these four statements, from simply chanting mantras to extremely elaborate meditation practices. In fact, remembering these teachings and putting them into practise is the backbone of the Buddhist path, and one of the many traditional methods that helps us do this is the practice of pilgrimage.

While many spiritual traditions encourage their followers to go on pilgrimage, as Shakyamuni Buddha is the supreme teacher in whom all Buddhists take refuge and whose teachings we do our best to follow, for us the most significant holy places are those where Buddha taught and acted for the benefit of sentient beings. While we should aspire to visit all these places, traditionally four sites are considered to be the most important:

- **Lumbini**, where Siddhartha was born in this world as an ordinary person;
- **Bodhgaya**, where Siddhartha became enlightened;
- **Varanasi (Sarnath)** where he taught the path to enlightenment; and
- **Kushinagar** where he passed into parinirvana.

It’s important to remember, though, that the main point of pilgrimage isn’t just to visit a saint’s birthplace, or to gaze on the site of an extraordinary happening. We undertake a pilgrimage to help us remember all the Buddha’s teachings, the quintessence of which is to be found in the four statements he made before he passed away. As Buddhist practitioners, remembering the Buddha isn’t like having a daydream about our teacher; what we’re doing is remembering each and every one of his teachings, because the Buddha *is* the teaching, not just the teacher. And this is why many traditional Buddhist countries, like Thailand, Tibet and Burma have named monasteries after Indian Buddhist holy sites, and have even built their own replicas of the Bodhgaya temple, as well as many other famous shrines and representations.

1. Siddhartha came to this earth as an ordinary person

This statement embraces one of the core Buddhist teachings on buddha nature (*tathagatagarbha*) that lies at the heart of the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. By telling us that Siddhartha started out as an ordinary person, Buddha is making it quite clear that he was not and never would be a primordially perfect God or almighty Creator. There are many stories in the *Jatakamala Sutra* about how Buddha was reborn over many lifetimes as different types of sentient being, like a bird, a turtle, or a fish, and that throughout these incarnations, he suffered all the same emotions and problems we do. This ordinary person then undertook various forms of



training involving almost unimaginable spiritual and physical hardship, until eventually he discovered the truth.

In his first statement Buddha is telling us that absolutely everyone has the same potential he had to be awakened to enlightenment, and all we have to do to be exactly like him is apply the right path. Every single sentient being has buddha nature and can therefore become enlightened; so, even though we're utterly convinced of our own stupidity and ignorance, and often despair at the ridiculous and terrible things we do that could be described as 'negative actions', no matter how dense our defilements, they are all removable.

Buddha is making another point here that may be of even greater significance. An enlightened being embodies all the noble enlightened qualities, including omniscience and omnipotence. This makes it pretty obvious that none of us is enlightened, because if we can't remember what we ate yesterday, we can't be omniscient; and as we rarely manage to fix even one of our many problems, we're definitely not omnipotent; not to mention our terminal inability to deal with the endless stream of anger, jealousy and pride we constantly generate. The trouble is that recognizing this reality can make the possibility of enlightenment seem remote, and many of us find ourselves wondering, "How on earth could *I* ever become a buddha?" It's simply too far-fetched to contemplate; a completely impossible mission! After all, we've been bad throughout beginningless time; we've been dirty, profane, 'sinful' and much too ordinary ever to become a buddha. But according to Lord Buddha, who, among many other qualities, really is omnipotent and omniscient, everything that keeps us ordinary is removable. This is the essence of his first statement: Siddhartha was a man with all the same problems and hang-ups we have, but he managed to remove them all and having done so became anything but ordinary.

2. Siddhartha achieved enlightenment

Here Buddha is telling us that for anyone at all enlightenment has to be and is achievable, and defilements have to be and are removable. If the goal of enlightenment is not achievable and defilements are not removable, the path we're trying to follow is itself deceptive and quite meaningless.

Imagine wanting to extract oil from a pile of sesame seeds. You know there is oil in the seeds and this is your reason for attempting the extraction. To put it another way, the fact that the seeds contain oil is the reason for bothering to apply the path of extraction. If there were no oil in the sesame seeds, the effort of trying to extract some would be a complete waste of energy. In this example, sesame seeds are a simile for spiritual seekers, and oil is a simile for the Buddha's qualities. Where are sesame seeds, there is also oil, and in the same way if you are a sentient being, you also have the enlightened qualities of a buddha. Which is why Buddha's statement that he himself managed to remove all his defilements to achieve enlightenment is so momentous.

As we look at a sesame seed we see the seed not the oil it contains, but we are certain that given the right set of circumstances the oil will emerge. This is a right view and it will not disappoint you. On the other hand, chipping away at a stone believing that eventually you'll extract oil can only result in disappointment.

Our job is to develop confidence in the fact that our own true nature has exactly the same potential as that of the Buddha, and that all we need to do to mature that potential is follow Siddhartha's example and apply the right methods.

3. The Buddha taught

We now know that all of us, however bad we may consider ourselves to be, have the potential to become a buddha. We also know that an Indian prince called Siddhartha, who was just like us, fully developed that potential, and by doing so demonstrated that it is possible to discover our buddha nature. If there were no



path to liberation, if Buddha Shakyamuni had been the one and only person ever to achieve enlightenment, there'd be absolutely no hope for the rest of us and his first two statements would be nothing more than empty posturing. But Lord Buddha, in his great compassion, did teach the path to liberation, which gave all those interested in attaining enlightenment the choice of a variety of methods for achieving it. The Buddha was never dogmatic about his teachings, though; he never tried to force anyone to do as he suggested. Instead, he always recommended that we analyse everything he taught to establish for ourselves whether or not we think it'll help us; and if it doesn't make sense, we shouldn't even try.

4. The Buddha passed into parinirvana

Buddha's last statement tells us that having attained enlightenment he didn't become an immortal saviour who would live permanently as a truly existing deity or god, or that one day he would come back to judge us. Nor did he become the kind of being who could be pleased by the lights and incense he was offered. A buddha cannot be bribed; no amount of bootlicking will affect his judgement; his compassion does not manifest in the form of rewards offered or punishment meted out; and he can never be annihilated. Although strictly speaking he's not 'immortal' in a worldly sense, neither does he no longer exist. To become a buddha and reach parinirvana is to go beyond time, space and everything, including the concept of 'buddha'. The symbolic Buddha whose golden skin we gaze on, who embodies the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks, has bare feet, holds a begging bowl and teaches his disciples, is a relative manifestation. Once Lord Buddha passed into parinirvana, he went beyond all concepts of gender, time and space and has now become the 'absolute Buddha'.

As you visit each of the four pilgrimage sites, try to remember the four statements the Buddha made.

Lumbini

Many holy sites are to be found in underdeveloped areas, so be warned, the living conditions won't compare with those provided on a luxury break in the French Alps. As you arrive at Lumbini in present day Nepal, remember that this was both where Siddhartha was born and where he found himself cornered by the reality of the terrible sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. In some ways, it's not his physical birth that's of primary importance for a Buddhist pilgrim, it's that in Lumbini, genuine renunciation was born in Siddhartha's mind. As a result, he quit his old life completely, leaving his palace, all his wealth and his entire family behind him, including his wife and baby son, which some people considered to be outrageous and cowardly. Those who seek the truth, though, can appreciate the true extent of his bravery; and that bravery, that fearlessness, that audacity, was born in Lumbini.

If your long journey to Nepal has been motivated by spiritual aspirations, taking a few photos and showing an anthropological interest in the holy relics and images won't be at all satisfying. Instead, make the most of this opportunity to diminish your defilements and bolster your store of merit and wisdom.

There isn't a specific practice that should always and only be done in Lumbini, but as a follower of the Buddha, what's best is to *emulate him* as much as possible. Aspire to learn to appreciate old age, sickness and death in the same way he did, and to summon the courage to do whatever it takes to go beyond birth and death. A deep sense of renunciation for samsaric life is the key to the spiritual path, so cultivate a heart-felt wish that renunciation grows within you so that you won't be glued to this samsaric world forever. Buddha's last



incarnation as an ordinary human being was as Prince Siddhartha; aspire to make your current life your last, so you no longer have to endure this endless cycle of existence, like a bee in a bottle. And always remember that people like us have buddha nature, no matter how ordinary we may appear to be.

Bodhgaya

Bodhgaya is little more than a shantytown and most visitors are shocked and stunned by the dust, the dirt, the beggars and the poverty—although (unfortunately) the situation is slowly improving. What many people experience once they've left the madness and entered the inner circle is that the atmosphere created by the Mahabodhi Temple is so potent it's as if you fall into a trance. Here you'll find the vajra seat (*vajra asana*, also known as the Diamond Seat) where, after many years of searching for the truth and six excruciating years of penance by the banks of the Niranjana River⁴, Siddhartha finally discovered the Middle Path and achieved enlightenment under the bodhi tree.

The actual tree under which Siddhartha sat was destroyed centuries ago, but a seed found its way to Sri Lanka and a tree was propagated so that later its fruit could be returned to India (there are many wonderful stories about how this seed was acquired) and planted on the exact spot of the original tree. The bodhi tree is important to Buddhists because it is a symbol of enlightenment. In spite of an abundance of trees, caves and temples in the area, it was in the shade of a bodhi tree that Siddhartha chose to sit, and it was also there that he crushed his final defilements to achieve enlightenment and become the liberator of the Three Worlds⁵. It is believed that all the one thousand buddhas of this fortunate aeon will achieve enlightenment right on this very same spot. All of which means that showing respect for the bodhi tree is not in any way the same as worshipping the spirit of a tree like a shaman, but rather a recognition of the extraordinary event that took place beneath its branches.

Bodhgaya is not only special because it's where all the buddhas will achieve enlightenment. According to Tantric Buddhism, everywhere in this world and all the phenomena that exist outside ourselves have a corresponding existence within our bodies. Good practitioners and yogis are able, in their practice, to visit the holy places that reside within the chakras and channels of their own bodies, and in this way make progress on their path to enlightenment. Those of us whose practice isn't quite so advanced can at least visit the outer reflection of these inner holy sites, the heart of which is usually considered to be in Bodhgaya.

Unfortunately, as the ancient people who lived in what we now call India valued learning by heart so highly, they appear to have discouraged the keeping of any kind of records. Consequently today the history of the central statue of Lord Buddha in the Mahabodhi Temple is uncertain, although a number of quite different versions of the tale about who made it and offered it to the temple continue to circulate.

One of these stories tells of an old woman who had met Shakyamuni Buddha when she was very young. Her son, who was a very successful merchant, asked what he could bring her back from his next business trip that would make her happy. "A statue of Lord Buddha that really looks like him," she immediately replied. "I miss him." And so her son asked one of India's most famous artists, Vishwa Karma, to sculpt an image of Buddha. Vishwa Karma was so inspired by his commission that he ended up creating three images of Buddha, from which the son chose the one that now resides in the Mahabodhi Temple. Legend has it that when she saw the image for the first time his mother exclaimed in wonder, "There's no halo of light and he can't speak, but apart from that there's no difference at all between this statue and Lord Buddha!"

⁴ This is the ancient name for the river that's known today as Falgu, or Phalgu River.

⁵ Three Worlds: the world of desire, the world of form, and the world of no-form. Padmakara Translation Group



One of the other statues, of Buddha at twelve years old, was offered as a gift to a Chinese emperor, who later included it in the dowry he settled on his daughter, Wencheng Gongzhu, when she married the King of Tibet. This is the Jowo Rinpoche statue that Ben of Kongpo spoke to and that can be seen today in the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa.

The Mahabodhi Temple houses several other extremely holy and beautiful statues, for example of Mañjushri and Avalokiteshvara, with whom, it is said, great practitioners throughout the ages have engaged in profound conversations.

Make the most of your time at this holy site. Meditate under the bodhi tree; however short your practice, it will help create in your mind the habit of purifying defilements and accumulating wisdom and merit. Again and again, try to remember the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and intensify their presence in your mind by reciting prayers, praises and sutras, and by offering whatever you can afford. While aspiration is of the utmost importance for beginners, rather than making mundane wishes for good health and prosperity, make your main focus the wish that eventually you will sit on exactly the same spot under the bodhi tree as Siddhartha, and achieve exactly what he achieved. It's also important to remember that no matter how many or how wild our thoughts and emotions, all such defilements are removable.

Vulture's Peak and the site of Nalanda University are not far from Bodhgaya, and if you can you should try to visit them. For Mahayana practitioners, Vulture's Peak is particularly significant as it was where the revolutionary science we now know as the Prajñāparamita was taught, which has not only soothed the anxieties of countless beings, but has actually liberated a great many too.

Sadly, only the ruins of Nalanda University still exist. It was one of the first centres of education in the Common Era, as well as one of the greatest, and is an extremely significant place of pilgrimage for students of the Mahayana. The majority of Buddhist teachings still being studied and practised in Korea, Japan, China and Tibet, were originally notes scribbled on rough slips of paper by teachers and students from this university. In the same way that England's Cambridge University and America's Columbia University can boast legions of famous alumni, from scientists and writers to presidents and wealthy businessmen, Nalanda also produced a prodigious number of extraordinary spiritual geniuses like Naropa, Nagarjuna and Shantideva—the great Indian master, scholar and bodhisattva who was most famous for writing the *Bodhicharyavatara* (*The Way of the Bodhisattva*), the classic guide to the Mahayana Path—and, whose contributions to the happiness of millions of people throughout the world are unparalleled.

Varanasi

There was a time when Varanasi was a famous cosmopolitan city, and even today Benares, as Varanasi is now known, is held in high regard for its great centres of learning. Sarnath, also known as Deer Park, is quite close to Varanasi and is important because it's where the Buddha first began to teach everything he had discovered under the bodhi tree.

What Buddha taught us in Varanasi is that we don't know what suffering really is. Everything we think will make us happy is either teetering on the edge of suffering or the cause of immediate suffering. It's relatively easy to recognize the obvious sufferings of this world, but very difficult to perceive that the so-called 'good time' some people have in samsara is really suffering or leads to suffering. Buddha pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, suffering doesn't land on us from an outside source but is a product of our own emotional responses. He made it clear that however much we suffer and however real that suffering and its causes may



feel to us, it is in fact an illusion and does not exist inherently. This truth, Buddha tells us, is something we can fully realize for ourselves, and what's more, he has shown us how by laying out a path for us to follow.

According to the Mahayana, Buddha not only taught the Four Noble Truths at Sarnath, but countless other teachings too. So, while you're in Sarnath remember that this is where Buddha first made the path available to people like you and me. And while you're at Deer Park, by remembering Buddha's words—for example, the truth of suffering—you will make a connection with the teaching as well as with the place it was taught.

Paying homage to the Triple Gem is always a good practice to do at holy sites, and paying homage to the teachings at Sarnath is particularly powerful. To pay homage to the teachings all you have to do is remember them. Of course, you can't think of all the Buddha's teachings at once because they are infinite, so just think of one of them, for example, "All compounded phenomena are impermanent", and contemplate its meaning for a while. In the same way that swimming in a tiny bay or along the coast counts as swimming in the ocean, thinking about just *one* teaching Buddha gave counts as remembering the teachings. If you like you can also read sutras, shastras and biographies of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, all of which necessarily contain the Dharma. Basically, try to remember and appreciate that a path that has the power to transcend samsara and remove all our defilements *actually exists*.

Kushinagar

Kushinagar is where the Buddha entered parinirvana, and is said to be where he died and his body was cremated. Passing into parinirvana is, of all the Buddha's teachings, the one that makes the most impact on our minds, as it transcends all our concepts about birth, old age, sickness, death, time, increasing, decreasing, samsara and nirvana. Those of us who have not yet woken up to our true nature are still bound by time, space, quantity and speed, unlike those who have entered parinirvana and cannot be bound by any kind of dualistic phenomena.

Ultimately, our purpose in following a spiritual path is to experience the awakened state completely free from ignorance, never again to fall back into a samsaric frame of mind. Unfortunately, it's a state that is extremely difficult to express in words, and it's also impossible intellectually to grasp its full scope. Nevertheless, by putting into practice the Buddha's advice about how to wake up, we develop confidence in our experience of the awakened state of mind that entirely transcends dualism, although we're unable to express our experience to others. It's like trying to explain to someone who's never eaten salt what it tastes like; all you can do is name other foods people might be familiar with, and say, "It's a bit like that". When you finally realize the simplicity of this state, a tremendous compassion for those who remain deeply asleep suffering the nightmare of worldly existence will arise in your mind.

Although we can't manage fully to achieve the awakened state right now, a glimpse is extremely encouraging for serious spiritual practitioners and helps increase our confidence in the path. Experiences that take us outside our ordinary lives can be particularly heartening, especially as the spiritual path is long, hazardous and laden with doubt and discouragement. A glimpse of the true nature of reality has the power to make a permanent dent in our samsaric mindstream; at the very least it will serve as an appetizer for the main event. Once we've made that first dent, we'll be able to inflict far more serious damage on the fabric of our samsaric life, and however small the dents and cracks might be, they're exactly the result a dedicated practitioner is looking for.

Imagine you're on a picnic near a beautiful lake under a glacier. You dive into the lake with great enthusiasm and swim vigorously away from the shore. Suddenly, you become aware of how cold the water is and how cold



your limbs feel. You stop swimming to try to get your bearings, but can't see the shore at all. Your legs cramp up and your arms are stiff and icy. The seconds pass like hours as you play with the idea that you're either going to freeze to death or drown.

At the moment you accept that death is inevitable, a local fisherman rows by, drags you out of the water and returns you to dry land, where a warm towel and bowl of piping hot soup await you. During the time it takes you to recover, everything around you that you'd almost lost—your family, your home, your boyfriend—holds far more meaning for you than at any other time in your life, and you become acutely aware that no matter how much you own, death can strike at any moment and doesn't accept bribes. Sadly, though, the shock wears off relatively quickly and you soon find yourself lured, once more, by promises of happiness in a material world.

The aim of all Buddhist practice is to catch a glimpse of the awakened state. Going on pilgrimage, soaking up the sacred atmosphere of holy places and mingling with other pilgrims are simply different ways of trying to achieve that glimpse. While at Kushinagar you can do all the practices you do at the other holy sites, perhaps the most significant one to do here is to contemplate Buddha's statement about impermanence, and if you know how, to meditate on extremelessness or emptiness.

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Pilgrimage to India

Travelling to India on your own is itself a pilgrimage experience. Tibetans refer to India as the 'Land of the Sublime Ones', and I think it's safe to say she has been, and continues to be, the most spiritually inclined of all the countries in the world. On the surface, India appears to be chaotic and, to a modern mind, illogical. Practically speaking India is constantly plagued by strikes and inefficiency, as well as all the other qualities of a 'third world country' that make the developed world laugh out loud. To them, inefficiency is the result of laziness, stupidity, a lack of practical common sense and, above all, competitive spirit. From a more spiritual point of view, though, the dirt, the culture that accepts that cows should roam freely, and the rats that get fat in India's posh restaurants are not necessarily a product of the 'inefficiency' perceived by modern business people.

All spiritual paths, especially those that originate in the East, place far more emphasis on the next life than on this one—considering this life to be important has never been on the agenda of spiritual practitioners. If a philosophy, spiritual path or religion isn't able to increase the spiritual seeker's wisdom by helping them understand non-duality and illusion, it should at least dent the habitual perception that everything we see and touch and which appears to be solid, is truly existing and logical. It should also debunk altogether the ideas that: all activities revolve around profit and loss; money is a god; and having a healthy bank balance and plenty of assets are the be all and end all of life—which is what many Asian countries teach their children.

Even though India is considered to be one of the fastest-growing nations from an economic and technological point of view, we must never forget that she has also produced some of the world's greatest ever specialists in non-duality, and traces of that kind of historical spiritual influence are still evident. India is a country whose greatest sons and daughters have discovered and developed extraordinary systems of morality, spiritual practice, rites and rituals; she is also the birthplace of notions like 'emptiness' and 'dependent arising', and for thousands of years has cherished the knowledge that all phenomena are an illusion. From a spiritual perspective, even the kingdom Prince Siddhartha was born to rule over was an illusion. Realizing this truth,



Siddhartha, like many fellow princes at that time, moved out of his palace, left all his personal relationships behind him, and completely uprooted himself from the familiar comfort zone he had been born into in order to search for the truth.



Photo: Clark Lu

I love this photo. It's both very funny and captures India's intrinsic plurality and eagerness to embrace modern innovation while managing to maintain her historical sense of the spiritual.

The first thing I notice when is the bright, cold neon light, then my eye is quickly drawn to the lime green confection worn by the model in the window—how can we ignore her?—and on to the extraordinary sight of a bull lying peacefully in the middle of the shop. Is it a coincidence that he's chosen to rest in front of a shrine to Shiva whose constant companion is said to be a bull? The shop is well kept, the shelves are neatly stacked and the floor has been swept clean. Yet there are tiles on the front step that are broken, and probably have been for some time. But the owner hasn't bothered about fixing such a small imperfection because life is short and there are so many other more important things for him to do.

For those used to spotlessly clean roads reserved exclusively for motor vehicles, the sight of a cow wandering down the middle of an Indian national highway may be disturbing. For many Indians, though, the cow is a symbol of god, she reminds them of god, and for some she actually is a god. While millions of Indians don't have enough to eat, cows amble where they please, even into shops to enjoy the air conditioning or to take a nap, confident that they will neither be killed and eaten nor shooed away; when they saunter down main roads any cars they meet will, as a matter of course, simply drive around them. The skies are always full of birds, and



however hungry India's poor may be, no one even seems to think about shooting and roasting them. This is something about India that has always amazed me, and I believe it's a sign she is a country that still upholds her historical cultural tolerance and endeavours to live by spiritual values—although she's probably one of the last remaining countries to do so. Most other countries gave up the struggle long ago.

There are parts of India where the likelihood of finding a non-vegetarian restaurant is extremely slim, not because Indians are health fanatics, or because vegetables are cheaper than meat, but because they have inherited the practice of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and therefore don't kill animals. In fact, many of the countries that have adopted vegetarianism and avoid killing other beings, imported the teachings and concepts underlying these practices from India.

It's pretty impressive for most modern people to hear that Prince Siddhartha abandoned his kingdom and put himself through years of penance before becoming the Buddha; what many don't realize is that he was not alone. Many, many great Indian saints of the past—not just Buddhists, but those following other paths like Jainism for example—effectively competed with each other over who could abandon their palaces first, while their counterparts in neighbouring countries were busily killing off their entire families in order to seize power. One story tells of an Indian prince who was so engrossed in a philosophical discussion about the three great spiritual paths, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, that when his General came to warn him of imminent attack by a neighbouring warlord, he said, "Just a moment, I first want to finish this discussion." And he lost his kingdom. Of course, from a worldly point of view he sounds like an idiot, but from a spiritual point of view he was the mightiest of kings.

Ultimately, spiritual and worldly values are totally contradictory, and this is something we simply have to accept. In the materialistic world, being 'rich' means you own plenty of property, run various businesses, and have a great deal of money. The spiritual world defines 'rich' as perfect contentment and points out that we are rich when we no longer torture our minds with thoughts about everything we lack.

Sadhus, holy men who are homeless and rarely have more than 100 rupees in their pockets, can be seen almost everywhere throughout India. They're often thin and black and more than a little grubby, but they're not necessarily ignorant or uneducated. It's quite possible to find sadhus who, for example, graduated from Harvard Law School, made a fortune for their families, and then returned to India to pursue a spiritual life. Of course, there are also charlatans dressed up as sadhus, nevertheless Indians always respect those who display the signs of a spiritual seeker however phoney they may be, and offer them hospitality—especially at the holy places.

For the pilgrim, India's chaos is a tremendous blessing because it really forces you to open your eyes. Imagine if going on pilgrimage were like driving down the highway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, or the autobahn from Munich to Frankfurt; the ease and monotony of that kind of journey wouldn't have the same effect at all. What if all holy sites were to become spotlessly clean and air-conditioned, with glass-cased exhibits that could not be touched, spotlights and uniformed security guards, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York? What if we never saw monks practising, beggars and street vendors hassling passers-by, open cremation grounds where flies feast on corpses day after day, or holy cows and monkeys blocking the roads? In a world where everything's the same there would be no character to these places, and the loss would be incalculable.

No matter where we go, it's the people we meet who create the ambience and character of a place and who inject it with a unique energy. A café becomes 'cool' or a 'dive' depending on the kind of people who hang out there; a rave party for three hundred over-60s and two teenagers is unlikely to involve much raving. It goes without saying that for people like us whose minds and perceptions aren't very flexible, a holy site is made powerful by collective devotion and veneration, not wall-to-wall carpets.

Over the past 2,500 years, the teachings of the Buddha have spread throughout Asia, and Buddhist practice has adapted to each of the cultures it met. One of the Indian traditions that has been embraced almost everywhere is the practice of erecting representations of the Buddha as both statues and stupas that are filled



with and blessed by holy relics. According to the Tantrayana, these stupas are then formally consecrated during the performance of specific rituals. However the Tantrayana also believes that the most powerful kind of consecration is sincere devotion for the Buddha's teachings. And so, while you're at a holy site, imagine that the devotion you offer is actually sanctifying the whole area, making it holier and even more beneficial for those sentient beings who will follow you there. The Buddha himself said, "Whoever thinks of me, I am in front of them." Just imagine what would happen if Bodhgaya were to become like Disneyland, with entry tickets and all the gloss and consumer-friendly exploitation that come when a famous monument is run by a team of professionals. Its impact on visitors would be quite different.

I sometimes wonder, though, if the spectacularly beautiful temples in Kyoto could ever be transformed into something that exudes a real sense of the spiritual. Japanese Zen temples are so perfect and so orderly: the lighting is exquisite, the display of objects of veneration minutely elegant, and everything is put together with a seamless perfection that you'd never find in India. The placing of a single flower is aesthetically matchless, and the signs indicating where to leave your shoes and which way to go are discrete, yet unmistakable. It all feels wonderfully cool, as if you're visiting a beautifully kept museum rather than a spiritual centre, and I always find I get carried away by the aesthetic perfection rather than the blessings.

Until recently, any kind of spiritual life in China had been in rapid decline; in fact, last century the Chinese nearly lost their connection with spiritual values altogether. Over the past few years, though, there has been a resurgence of interest in Buddhism and previously forsaken temples are springing back to life, providing spiritual homes for hundreds of thousands of devout Chinese. I really hope their devotion and aspirations will consecrate these newly resurrected holy places so that visiting Chinese holy sites will become meaningful. Otherwise, places like Mount Putuoshan in Shanghai and, to a certain extent, Mount Wu Tai Shan in Shanxi, will become nothing more than tourist traps, where the gloss and sparkle of their nightclubs and five-star hotels will far outshine that of the temples.

India, by simply being herself, opens our eyes and dismantles our habitual rationale, so take every opportunity to look at absolutely everything. Try not to shy away from the unfamiliar, the storytellers, the ear-cleaners, the masseurs, the shoe-polishers and the roadside booksellers who will surprise you with wonderfully obscure books that you'd never find in New York or Sydney. India's streets display the full spectrum of human experience, from the brilliant colours and exotic smells of the spice markets, magnificent marble monuments and working elephants, to the bodies of people who have simply died where they lay, mangy dogs and heartbreaking poverty. Life and death are both vibrantly present. Every experience is distinct and vividly real, with no built-in anaesthetics to dull the extremities of joy or pain. And it is certainly never boring.

Few would have the guts, but I sometimes wish parents would bring their kids to India's holy sites while they're still in their early teens, where for once in their lives they would be brought face to face with the raw, unadulterated reality of life. Most kids are so overprotected and spoilt in the modern world that they know little about life outside their self-indulgent cocoons. Even those who aren't spoilt usually have plenty of time to brood about how fat or thin they are, or whether or not their sneakers are cool, or how to style their hair. In stark contrast, millions of Indian children living on the streets have no free time at all. Their only priority is survival, and for many a pair of shoes four sizes too big with holes in would be the height of luxury. For these kids, the shadow of death is a constant companion; the closest most modern kids get to thinking about death is when they watch a movie or play a video game.

Those who have just started out on their spiritual path sometimes need sources of inspiration that can't be found in the teachings they listen to or books they study, and visiting the holy places in India offers tremendous opportunities for encountering such inspiration. Hindu sadhus, for example, whose naked bodies are smeared with ash and who spend their entire lives engaged in spiritual practice; Tibetan monks who prostrate themselves in the dust thousands and thousands of times a day; the sense of peace and gentleness created by the serenity of Theravadin monks as they walk in meditation; the stillness of Japanese monks in deep samadhi; the beauty



of hundreds of thousands of butter lamp offerings; the spiritual music that fills the air; and the opportunity to sit peacefully, like the Buddha, under the bodhi tree.

It's not unusual to meet practitioners who have prostrated across the continent from as far away as Lhasa. Their practice, and that of other pilgrims, has saturated places like Bodhgaya, Lhasa and Shwedagon with an ambience and energy that can inspire even the hardest hearts.

In most modern countries, a monk or anyone who dedicates their life to spiritual practice without making any material contribution to the world is considered to be a useless burden on society. People cringe when they see them in the streets, in the same way they cringe when confronted with a large spider or a bad smell. The irony is that sadhus and monks cause no harm whatsoever to the world, in stark contrast to the top MBA graduates whose toxic lifestyle includes wreaking havoc on the environment by travelling in private jets, and under the pretext of 'helping others' driving a world economy that exploits and depletes its natural resources to produce an excess of things we don't need, and provide the masses with mindnumbingly boring jobs.

For hundreds of years, courageous Dharma practitioners from Tibet and China devoted large portions of their lives to the long and dangerous journey to India so they could visit the land where the Buddha and great bodhisattvas once lived. Many such pilgrims, having finally arrived at Bodhgaya or Lumbini after months of travelling, unexpectedly experienced remarkable realisations, visions and dreams. There are marvellous stories about the experiences of these pilgrims: of carved stone statues speaking to them, and of their doubts dissolving the moment they laid eyes on certain holy images, or as a gentle breeze caressed their cheeks as they waited to enter a temple. There are stories about practitioners who, by simply looking at the spot under the bodhi tree where Buddha sat, were entirely overwhelmed by the fact that on an ordinary flat stone—not an expensive Italian sofa or jade throne—Siddhartha exhausted the cycle of existence and finally finished with samsara, bringing to an end the continuous sufferings of rebirth to become the ultimate Jina or Victorious One. Not only that, but on this very spot the future Buddha, Maitreya, will accomplish exactly the same feat.

It is important for us to remember that making a tour of the Buddhist holy sites won't solve all our problems in one go, nor will we immediately attain enlightenment. At the same time, we human beings are dependent on the conditions and circumstances in which we find ourselves; as Buddha said, "All phenomenal existence is conditioned, and that conditioning is dependent on motivation." Conditioning and motivation are the central engines that power the cyclic existence of samsara, and when we are free of them we will also be released from the cycle of rebirth and death to enjoy the freedom known as nirvana. Conditioning has a tremendous impact on us at every level, for example how we choose to dress, our education, the political system under which we live, the food we eat, the people we hang out with and the places we visit. Therefore the holy sites we explore during a pilgrimage will be yet another powerful conditioning influence on us, and a very positive one.

What exactly is the right motivation for going on a pilgrimage? At best, it is to develop wisdom, love, compassion, devotion and a genuine sense of renunciation (renunciation mind). So, as you set out, you should make the wish that your journey, one way or another, will continuously remind you of all of the great noble enlightened qualities of the Buddha, and that as a result you will accumulate merit and purify defilements.

Initially the idea of developing a good motivation sounds quite easy, mostly because we approach it with the same habitual assumptions we've grown up with. After all, what's so hard to understand? A motivation is nothing more than a thought, it's not even an action, so what's the big deal? You'll find your attitude changes, though, when you start working with your mind. Most of us find, much to our surprise, that establishing the right motivation is really quite difficult and, certainly at the outset, we struggle.

Once you get better at it though, you will be able to develop the right motivation from the moment you start to plan your trip. As you pack and shop for diarrhoea tablets, excitement mounts because everything you're doing is part of the process that will take you to the land where the Buddha lived and taught. You'll be able to see and touch and smell the land where so many of the great and realized bodhisattvas lived and taught. These days, people go on holiday to Hawaii in search of romance, to Hong Kong for the shopping, or to Rome and



London for the culture. You're travelling to India because you're inspired by the great and courageous spiritual adventurers who made their homes there—and not just followers of Buddha, but saints and teachers from many of the other great religions.

Of course for most of us the Buddha is our teacher and our inspiration, and while we may be fascinated by descriptions of his golden skin and ushnisha⁶, such details have little to do with our faith in him. What really arouses our devotion are his teachings and all the rational, logical methods he has offered us for uncovering the truth. As Buddhists our aim isn't merely to follow his advice or become his servants; our ultimate goal is to become exactly like him—an enlightened being. So, ideally, our sole motivation and the driving force behind absolutely everything we do, including going on pilgrimage, is the wish to become enlightened.

The backbone of the spiritual method for discovering the truth is **mindfulness**, and yet the causes of mindfulness are scarce. Followers of the Buddha do everything possible to invoke, maintain and strengthen their mindfulness and use all the different gadgets and markers available to remember it, for example, visiting temples, hanging a picture of the Buddha in the living room, reciting sutras and mantras, and listening to, contemplating and meditating on the Buddha's words. Any method that reminds us to practise mindfulness is welcome, and our motivation for visiting the holy sites is to take advantage of the profusion of signposts for mindfulness they contain.

⁶ The 'ushnisha' is the protuberance on the top of Buddha's head, and one of the thirty-two major marks of a buddha.



PART TWO: THE PRACTICE

Accumulation and Purification

There are so many ways of improving our understanding of Dharma practice while on pilgrimage, but for the sake of simplicity, let's categorize them into the two-fold method of accumulating wisdom and merit, and the purification of defilements.

Whoever we are, the vast majority of us perform two activities almost instinctively: we like to throw out our rubbish and love collecting goodies. And both activities make us feel as though we're achieving something. It feels good, for example, to tidy up your bedroom after months of neglect, and to hang a new photo on the wall or fill a vase with fresh flowers; it transforms your mood completely. And this is a universal habitual pattern that can be usefully employed as a format on a spiritual path, where all practices can be presented as being either for purification (throwing out the rubbish) or accumulation (collecting goodies). However, purification and accumulation aren't two separate things at all, they happen simultaneously, in the same way that when you do your housework, you're not only cleaning up the mess, but also making your house more beautiful.

Human beings experience mood swings all the time: one minute you're in a 'collecting' mood, the next all you want to do is 'clean', and every so often you want to do both. It's the same when you follow a spiritual path: sometimes you'll want to stress purification, at other times you'll want to accumulate merit, and occasionally you'll want to do both at the same time. On a pilgrimage you should do both as often as possible and in as many different ways as you can. There's also a long tradition of making pilgrimages for loved ones and those with whom you have a strong connection, good or bad; it's a very popular practice in traditional Buddhist societies, especially for those who have died, because by dedicating all the hardships you endure throughout your journey, and all the sacrifices you make in terms of your time, energy, possessions and money, you can purify their negative actions.

Wisdom is, quite simply, unbiased perception; it is the mind that has a clear, absolute and complete picture of the true nature of reality. Those who have wisdom will never be deceived by their experiences; whatever happens to them will not be distorted or altered or diverted from the truth of ultimate reality in any way. We cultivate wisdom by listening to authentic spiritual teachings, contemplating them and by practising meditation; and it's absolutely vital that we do develop wisdom, because without it we can never be free from delusion.

Merit manifests in our abilities. With the ability to act positively, we are able to create the circumstances necessary for seeing our world and everything in it as it really is. Without merit, creating such circumstances is impossible; with merit, whatever we hear, contemplate and meditate on will steer us towards developing the ability or conditions necessary for generating wisdom. Wisdom and merit, therefore, go hand in hand: merit produces wisdom and wisdom produces merit. Ultimately, merit is the ability to gain control over our lives, so that not only will we be able to understand the truth, but also live it.

What's strange is that even though it's so easy—especially for those on the Mahayana path—people like us rarely engage in the kinds of activity that accumulate merit. By offering no more than a single flower petal to the Buddha we accumulate merit, and if that merit is then dedicated to the ultimate happiness of all sentient beings, it is multiplied billions of times over. If we then apply the wisdom of emptiness by considering the flower (the offering), the Buddha (the one to whom the offering is made) and ourselves (the one making the



offering) to be nothing more than illusions, not only do we accumulate an enormous amount of merit, but also tremendous wisdom. And this is how offering a single flower petal can lead us to wisdom.

The bottom line here is that the accumulation of merit and wisdom are like two wings of a bird, both are absolutely necessary.

Whichever of the methods for accumulating merit you choose, whether you offer a single flower or cover an entire temple with gold, one thing is certain: you should never do good for short-sighted, selfish, worldly reasons. If you do, the whole point of the spiritual path will be negated. So, as you make offerings and practise Dharma at the holy sites, even when your motivation is a little worldly, at least try from time to time to remember that the whole point of your practice is to eliminate ego, selfishness and pride.

Defilements, however, just get in the way and are what need to be abandoned because they are the deep-seated, stubborn habits that always lead to the sufferings of hope, fear and pain.

If we examine what it is that we really long for and desire, what it is that we struggle ceaselessly for, what it is that we pour all our efforts into trying to achieve, the vast majority of us will discover that above everything else, what we really hunger for is complete autonomy and total independence. Our ideal world is one in which we don't have to rely on anyone or anything, where we're never dictated to, where we never have to ask for favours and where there's no one breathing down our necks. Basically, to be free to do whatever we want, whenever we want to do it And it's something we'd attempt virtually anything to achieve.

From a worldly point of view, this pursuit of perfect independence has spawned countless activities. On an individual level, for example, as part of the process of liberating housewives from the frustrating and time-consuming task of delegating housework to cleaning staff and making sure they do their jobs properly, someone invented a vacuum cleaner. When individuals gather into groups, like-minded people work together because they're convinced that if the principles of individualism were adopted universally, or if human rights were upheld, or democracy globally instituted, or communism, or if we all put more effort into furthering the progress of science and technology, we would achieve independence for all humanity. We may not be able to agree on a single method, yet the whole of mankind is geared towards the same ultimate goal: absolute freedom with no trace of dependency.

Freedom is also the ultimate goal in Buddhism and, of course the Buddha's definition of 'freedom' embraces far more than mere human rights, democracy, and so on. Freedom in spiritual terms is only experienced once we are released from all our hang-ups, '-isms' and views. Buddha tells us that even though we all crave freedom above everything else, in our ignorance we have no clue about how to accrue the causes that will make freedom a reality, and instead end up cultivating the causes that will inevitably make the possibility of our release more and more remote. Like a hungry fish that swallows the fisherman's hook in a bid to satisfy its craving for food, or a moth so completely mesmerized by a candle that it cremates itself in the naked flame, or a deer lured into a trap by the sweet melodies of the hunter's flute, for just a taste of temporary bliss we continue to plunge ourselves recklessly into love stories that almost immediately become horror stories, and where the very object of our desire ends up destroying us.

The limitations placed on us by the concepts of democracy and human rights, as well as the multitude of gadgets we wallpaper our lives with just end up making us more and more dependent. It's as obvious as daylight that none of us is free; we live under an oppressive dictatorship where every move is prescribed by our habits and emotions and strengthened by our environment. Everything our world produces, from iPhones to silk lingerie, is designed to intensify and stimulate our hopes and fears and all our emotional responses, as well as strengthen our dependency. From time to time, a handful of us may glimpse the depths of the slavery into which we have fallen and long to shed the chains of habit and emotion that bind us. We desperately try to face the truth by dispelling the worldly illusions that hold us captive, but as we lack merit, the strong current of our defilements and the sheer force of our habits drag us further down into the stinking bog of distraction.



How to Accumulate Merit at Holy Sites

Buddhist practitioners always tend to make the same mistakes: they don't do the small things that accumulate merit, like making daily water offerings, because they imagine them to be trivial and worthless; yet neither do they make the big gestures, like offering financial support to a Buddhist university for a year, or lighting 100,000 butter lamps every month, or building a temple, because they don't have the time or the resources. So they end up doing nothing at all.

For beginners accumulating merit requires effort. For example, a pilgrim from California might consider bringing fresh flowers from their garden to offer at the holy sites in India. It's not that Californian flowers themselves will accumulate more merit than local Indian flowers, but the effort involved in protecting the flowers throughout the journey from California to India, as well as the money spent in the process, will. At the same time, buying flowers from a little girl at a holy site motivated by the wish to help the child by offering *her* flowers to the Buddha, will also increase the merit generated by the offering. Or the motivation might be that whoever it is who sells you the offering flowers will, as a result, make a connection with the Triple Gem. This kind of motivation is a very profound method for accumulating merit, because you are using your own merit as a bridge to connect other people with the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Pilgrimage is such a powerful method for accumulating merit that even making the preparations, like saving the money to pay for it and booking time off work, will earn a great deal. If we can also sprinkle our motivation with the dew of bodhichitta, so that everything we do associated with our pilgrimage is dedicated not only to pacifying our own delusion and suffering, but to bringing all sentient beings to enlightenment—the highest aspiration possible—then all the seemingly mundane activities involved, from packing and buying tickets to circumambulating a stupa, become the activities of one who follows a perfect Mahayana path.

People often wonder if it's selfish to think about the amount of merit accumulated through good actions. While it's important to be aware of the risk of being selfish when it comes to accumulation, as a Mahayana practitioner and an aspiring bodhisattva, if you dedicate all the merit you create towards the ultimate happiness and enlightenment of all sentient beings, your actions will be anything but selfish.

The Practices

While Buddhism offers a wide variety of ritual practices, sadhanas and prayers written by the great masters of the past, the accumulation of merit and purification of defilements aren't dependent on the performance of rituals. So, if you prefer simpler forms of practice, here are a few you can do at holy sites that will accumulate huge amounts of merit.

Let's imagine you've just arrived at Lumbini. The first thing you should do is to clean up the rubbish and mess around the stupa. You don't have to decontaminate the whole site, just tidy up a small area—a two foot strip around the stupa would be fine. And rather than bother other people for cleaning equipment, use your own handkerchief or packet of tissues to wipe the ground clean. Then anoint the space with perfume, if you have some, and start making offerings and doing your practice.

The traditional offering substances are water, flowers, incense, food and lights, but your offering doesn't have to be enormous; if you only have one candle, it's enough. And it doesn't really matter how you present your offerings, you can just leave them in a pile or arrange them beautifully. The thing to remember is that the



more effort you make, the more merit you accumulate, and if you only have two candles and four flower petals, it's still possible to make them pleasing to the eye.

Once you've purified the environment and arranged some offerings, you can do a little meditation practice or recite the verses for taking refuge you like best, or say your favourite prayers.

When you've finished, clear away any plastic wrappers or bags that you brought your offerings in. And not just your own; collecting rubbish others discard at holy sites is another way of accumulating merit. Remember, the point here isn't to sterilize this holy place, but to purify your own defilements.

You'll meet a great many other pilgrims making offerings at the holy sites you visit, especially at hotspots like Bodhgaya. Some will make a great show of the amount of offerings they make, which might cause jealousy and envy amongst the less well-off pilgrims. To behave in such a way is of no benefit at all, because making offerings ostentatiously not only does not accumulate merit, it's actually a powerful cause of amassing negative karma. Therefore always practise humility, never flaunt your wealth or the offerings you make, and never draw attention to yourself by showing off in any way.

The Practice of Taking Refuge

Buddhadharma offers a vast treasury of powerful spiritual practices, but none shines brighter than the practice of taking refuge. By taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha all the fundamental elements of Buddhist practice are brought together, and following the path of refuge guarantees that we move a little closer to developing right view.

The crucial point of refuge is to understand that the refuge objects we focus on during the practice don't remain inanimate representations, but actually become the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

The indispensable supports necessary for the practice of refuge are the noble qualities of renunciation, devotion, and the love and compassion of bodhichitta. None of these qualities is easy to generate or maintain, even for the most seasoned practitioner. So, they're especially challenging for beginners like us, and more often than not end up living in our minds as vague, abstract ideals. Nevertheless practitioners over the centuries have found that the best way to develop these supports is to pray fervently to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha with the request that we attract no obstacles that might obstruct the flowering of these qualities in our minds. These great practitioners also recommend that, to develop a sense of genuine renunciation, we should contemplate the pain and suffering that is samsara, and nurture love and compassion for others by acknowledging that every single one of them has, at one time or another, been someone we truly loved.

Developing bodhichitta is such an important element in our practice that we should do whatever it takes to maintain a loving and compassionate attitude. One method is to contemplate some of the terrible sufferings people endure in this samsaric life, like the young girls, often no more than eight years old, who are kidnapped from their homes, transported over long distances in dark, airless, overcrowded trucks and sold into prostitution. It's hard even to think about the terror and pain they're put through, or the sufferings of their parents, but we should. Perhaps even more important is to think about the kidnapers whose ignorance and stupidity lead them to commit such atrocities. By imagining these kinds of situations again and again, we can begin to thaw the fortress of ice that imprisons our frozen hearts until, eventually, it melts.

As we remember the qualities of the Triple Gem, what we're actually doing is thinking about the reality and truth of all phenomena. Beginners like us can begin by thinking of Lord **Buddha**. Simply remembering as many of his different names as we can is a very powerful practice. We can also remind ourselves of the stories we've heard about him and the famous events that defined the course of his life, like the moment when, as Prince



Siddhartha, he cut off his glorious mane of hair. By doing so, eventually we too will be able to understand the nature of reality and all phenomena.

To remember the Buddha at the highest level is to accept that all sentient beings, not just human beings, have the inherent goodness that Buddhists call 'buddha nature'; and this kind of remembrance is very similar to the ultimate practice of refuge.

Relatively speaking, taking refuge could be: imagining the Buddha sitting beneath a tree in the lush gardens of Lumbini; or repeating his name in our minds; or repeating the names of anyone related to him, for example his mother Queen Maya, his aunt Prajapati (who raised him after his mother died and became the first ordained nun); or his father King Shuddodana. Imagine the forests and groves through which they must have walked, where the bejewelled feet of royal elephants crushed the scattered lotus petals that formed a soft carpet for the royal family to tread, the air overflowing with music from the strings of a tambura. Imagine the Buddha folding his robes neatly and washing his wooden begging bowl in cool, clear water, and continue to repeat his names in your mind. Or, if you prefer, chant his mantra:

tadyatha om mune mune mahamunaye svaha

As you engage in the practice of remembering the **Dharma**, don't limit yourself to reading sacred texts. Far more important is to remember the truths that Buddha taught, for example that all compounded phenomena are impermanent; that everyone will eventually die; that however much wealth and property we accumulate this lifetime it will all eventually be dispersed; whatever we build will collapse, and whatever and whoever we've gathered into our lives will one day be separated from us. Likewise, remember that the nature of all phenomena is emptiness and that how something appears is not what it really is; how and what we see this world is a result of our own perception and doesn't truly exist.

We remember the **Sangha** when we think about the community of people who believe in and actively follow the path of the truth of wisdom and consciously generate the love and compassion of bodhichitta.

The practice of taking refuge involves surrendering and gaining protection. For example, when it's raining if you don't want to get wet you take refuge beneath an umbrella. Similarly, if you're afraid of feeling pain and don't want endure the suffering of clinging to illusions, simply taking refuge in the truth will free you from all the disappointments caused by taking refuge in false truths.

The effect or result of taking refuge is that you truly understand that all compounded phenomena are impermanent, that all phenomena are illusory, that the world around you is the product of your own perception and that both intellectually and practically everyone's perception is different. If you deny this truth, you will be like a child building sandcastles: when the sandcastle collapses, the child will weep.

Traditionally, practitioners accompany the mental practice of taking refuge with the physical practice of making prostrations, which are particularly recommended as an antidote to pride. To do a prostration either throw yourself full length onto the floor, or touch the ground with all four limbs and the most precious part of your body, your forehead. By doing so you are symbolically surrendering yourself to the protection of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and offering them your most treasured possessions, your body, speech and mind.

To practise taking refuge at a holy site, start by doing three prostrations, then sit somewhere out of the way so you don't block the path for others. Try to imagine all the buddhas and bodhisattvas in front of you, but if that's too difficult (it's quite rare for anyone to be able to see them physically) concentrate instead on picturing them in your mind's eye and feel absolutely confident that they are not inanimate statues but vibrantly alive right there in front of you. All these enlightened beings are overflowing with wisdom and can see everything



in samsara. There's absolutely nothing they don't know about the past, present and future, their compassion is immense and as quick as lightning—particularly for people like us who are the most ignorant and defiled beings in existence—and their power is so immense that they can completely uproot us from the suffering of this otherwise never-ending cycle of existence.

A buddha is said to have thirty-two major and eighty minor marks, which is a symbolic way of trying to communicate various philosophical ideas to limited beings like us. In reality, though, the body, speech, mind, qualities and activities of a buddha know no limit and are completely beyond numbers. To put it another way, there is not a single thing in the whole of samsaric existence that is 'not buddha' and for those who have accumulated enough merit, even the sight of an autumn leaf drifting to the ground can inspire renunciation and devotion—in which case the leaf itself could be said to be a manifestation of the Buddha.

For most of us, though, the word 'buddha' immediately brings to mind the idea of a person, and as these holy sites are associated with the story of Prince Siddhartha, it's natural for us to think of Buddha as a human being. By doing so, though, we are quantifying Buddha, whereas ultimately he is unquantifiable and cannot be bound by time, place or gender. This means that if you see or hear something that inspires wisdom and the love and compassion of bodhichitta to arise in your mind, it could also be said to be a manifestation of the Buddha. Bearing this in mind, on a more practical level it can help to imagine the Buddha with golden skin, wearing traditional monks' robes, his hands in *bhumisparsha mudra*⁷, and surrounded by his entire entourage, including exquisitely clothed bodhisattvas, arhats, monks and laypeople. Choose whichever form pleases you, for example the style of Tibetan thangkas or a particular tradition of Chinese painting. If you prefer something culturally more authentic, take your inspiration from Indian paintings.

However you wish the Buddha to appear as your object of refuge, imagine he is standing or sitting in front of you, vivid and alive, and take refuge in him. If you wish, you can also circumambulate the stupa, temple or the entire holy site you're visiting, as a symbolic gesture indicating your insatiable appetite for enlightened qualities.

To help you get into the mood for practice, you might try reciting the sutra *Recalling the Qualities of the Three Jewels*:

Homage to the Omniscient One!

Thus the Buddha, the transcendent, accomplished conqueror,
 The Tathagata who has attained suchness,
 The arhat who has conquered all foes,
 Is a perfectly and completely enlightened buddha,
 Endowed with insight and worthy of reverence,
 The Sugata who has reached the state of bliss,
 The knower of the entire world,
 The guide and tamer of beings,
 The unsurpassable one,
 The teacher of gods and humans,
 The Buddha Bhagavat.
 The Tathagata is in harmony with all merit.
 He does not waste the sources of virtue.
 He is fully adorned with patience.
 He is the foundation of the treasures of merit.
 He is ornamented with the excellent minor marks.

⁷ The mudra of touching the earth.



He is the full blossoming of the major marks.
 His activity is timely and fitting.
 Seeing him, there is nothing displeasing.
 He brings true joy to those who have faith.
 His insight overwhelms all in its splendour.
 His powers are invincible.
 He is the teacher of all sentient beings.
 He is the father of all bodhisattvas.
 He is the sovereign of all the noble ones.
 He is the guide who leads beings to the city of nirvana.
 He has measureless wisdom.
 He possesses inconceivable fearlessness.
 His speech is utterly pure.
 Its tones are melodious.
 One can never have enough of looking at him.
 His form is without comparison.
 He is unsullied by the realm of desire.
 He is quite unsullied by the realm of form.
 He is not caught up in the formless realm.
 He is completely liberated from suffering.
 He is totally liberated from the aggregates.
 He is not possessed with the constituents of ordinary experience.
 He is in control of the sense fields.
 He has cut right through the knots.
 He is completely liberated from torment.
 He is freed from craving.
 He has crossed over the river.
 He is perfected in all the wisdoms.
 He abides in the wisdom of all the buddhas of past, present and future.
 He does not dwell in nirvana.
 He abides in perfect finality.
 He remains on the level where he sees all sentient beings.
 All these are the authentic and supreme qualities of the embodiment of the Buddha.

The sacred Dharma is good at the beginning, good in the middle and good at the end.
 It is excellent in meaning, excellent in words and syllables.
 It is distinctive.
 It is totally complete.
 It is utterly pure.
 It completely purifies.
 The Buddha teaches the Dharma perfectly.
 It brings unerring vision.
 It is without affliction.
 It is constant and always timely.
 It is trustworthy when applied.
 Seeing it fulfils one's purpose.
 The wise can validate it through their own awareness.



The Dharma taught by the buddha relies entirely on training the mind.
 It brings about renunciation.
 It causes one to arrive at perfect enlightenment.
 It is without contradiction.
 It is all-embracing.
 It is constant.
 It is the cessation of all uncertainty.

As for the Sangha of the Great Vehicle, they enter thoroughly.
 They enter with awareness.
 They enter straightforwardly.
 They enter harmoniously.
 They are worthy of veneration with palms joined together.
 They are worthy of receiving prostrations.
 They are a glorious field of merit.
 Offering to them brings great purification.
 They are an object of generosity.
 They are in every way the greatest object of generosity.

The lord who possesses great kindness,
 The omniscient teacher,
 The source of oceans of merit and virtue,
 I prostrate to the Tathagata.

Pure, the cause of freedom from passion,
 Virtuous, liberating from the lower realms,
 This alone is the supreme, ultimate truth:
 I prostrate to the Dharma, which is peace.

Having been liberated, they show the path to liberation.
 They are fully dedicated to the disciplines,
 A holy field of merit, endowed with noble qualities:
 I prostrate to the Sangha.

I prostrate to the Buddha, the leader
 I prostrate to the Dharma, the protector,
 I prostrate to the Sangha, the community,
 I prostrate respectfully and always to these three!

The Buddha's virtues are inconceivable;
 The Dharma's virtues are inconceivable;
 The Sangha's virtues are inconceivable.
 Having faith in these inconceivables,
 Therefore the fruition is inconceivable:
 May I be born in a completely pure realm!⁸

⁸ Translation by Rigpa Translations 2001. Translated with reference to an existing version by the Nalanda Translation Committee.



Reading sutras out loud or to yourself at any time accumulates a great deal of merit, and so reading them at holy sites will, no doubt, have a tremendous effect.

Then, Take Refuge reading any refuge prayers that inspire you, for example,

Until the essence of enlightenment is reached,
I go for refuge to the Buddhas.
Also I take refuge in the Dharma
And all the host of Bodhisattvas.⁹

Alternatively, you may find it more effective to make up one of your own, spontaneously on the spot. Traditionally, the two main elements of a refuge prayer you should include are that you wish to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and ask them for protection. Your prayer doesn't have to be an elegant literary composition or follow a particular poetic tradition, or anything like that; simply express in your own words your wish for protection and help—and if you are too shy to say it out loud, think the words in your mind.

Take refuge in the Buddha as the guide, the Dharma as the path and the Sangha as companions along the way, and then ask them for protection from ordinary misfortunes like catching a serious viral infection, contracting the plague, being involved in a car accident, and mishaps of all sorts, like swallowing a plastic toothpick. More important, though, is to ask for protection from your own selfishness, egocentricity, insatiable desire, cloud-like ignorance, destructive anger, judgemental mind, dualistic thinking, impure perception and all the other many obstacles that obscure us.

Often as beginners we tend to take refuge in the Buddha believing him to be a saviour or a god, and consequently our prayers can be a little petty. Actually, from one point of view, there's no reason why we shouldn't pray for worldly well-being, like good health, a happy relationship, success in the business world, or even victory for our football team. After all, the loss of a football match can easily throw our lives into such disarray that we won't be able even think about the Dharma for weeks. So, while it's important to remember that a desire for physical well-being, personal wealth and the Champion's League Title is not the approach of one who genuinely wants to transcend this worldly life, we're only human. Almost all of us long for ordinary happiness. And so, if we can slightly shift the emphasis of our ordinary prayers and ask for protection from ill health because we wish for more time and opportunities to help others, or money and power so we can support the Dharma, what started out as a selfish desire will become a profound source of benefit for everyone. Ideally, always include all sentient beings in your prayers; at the very least, include your friends and everyone you know. And don't just wish them luck in their worldly endeavours, also pray that they will connect with the Dharma, attain enlightenment and liberate billions of sentient beings.

Finally, to make taking refuge even more profound, once you've finished saying prayers imagine all the buddhas and bodhisattvas dissolve into you so that you and those in whom you have been taking refuge become inseparable; remain in that state for a few moments. This last step is quite important as it reminds us that, from the ultimate point of view, the objects of refuge are not externally existing almighty protectors who judge, punish and reward us from their dwelling place in heaven.

If you practise the Mahayana path, having laid the foundation of your practice by taking refuge, now is the time to take the Bodhisattva Vow. Whenever great masters visit holy places they usually make the most of their time there by taking the Bodhisattva Vow, or at least renewing it. According to the Mahayana tradition before doing so you should first accumulate some merit, for example by saying the Seven-Branch Prayer.

⁹ Revised edition of *The Way of the Bodhisattva (Bodhicharyavatara)* by Shantideva, Chapter 2 verse 26, trans. Padmakara Translation Group, *Shambhala Publications*.



The Seven-Branch Prayer

The Mahayana offers a wonderful combination of wisdom and skilful methods that are easy to execute, yet bring about remarkable results. You might imagine that in order to accumulate infinite merit you would have to make tremendous sacrifices entirely beyond your capacity, like offering your own flesh and bones, or your home; but material offerings are not the only kind we can make. If they were it wouldn't be a very practical system because most of us aren't able to afford to make them. Fortunately, the Mahayana path has the wisdom and skill to accommodate *all* practitioners, not just the wealthy, and offers methods for visualizing offering substances that accumulate exactly the same amount of merit as material offerings would have done. To put it another way, the Mahayana path is easy, blissful, not painful, yet its methods reap the same amount of merit and wisdom as material offering.

An example of one of these extraordinary methods is the Seven Branch Offering which involves seven different ways of accumulating merit, each of which serves a specific purpose. The offerings are: prostration, offering, confession, rejoicing, requesting the turning of the wheel of the dharma, asking buddhas not to pass into parinirvana, and dedication of merit. And you can chose to recite any of the Seven-Branch Prayers that are found in sutras and Buddhist practices.

Prostration

We do prostrations to crush one of our most stubborn shells, pride. If a person is proud there will be no space for enlightened qualities to grow, and without enlightened qualities the activities of a bodhisattva will be impeded. Besides that, pride is by nature insecure and precipitates many levels of hypocrisy.

Imagine you can multiply your body and that trillions and trillions of you are prostrating before the objects of refuge. The Buddha said that by doing so each of the imagined prostrations will accumulate exactly the same amount of merit.

To Buddhas of the past, the present, and all future time,
And to the Dharma and Sublime Assembly,
With bodies many as the grains of dust
Upon the ground, I will prostrate and bow.

To shrines and all supports
Of bodhichitta I bow down;
All abbots who transmit the vows, to every learned master,
And all sublime practitioners of Dharma.¹⁰

Offering

The antidote to miserliness is to make offerings. Miserliness is rooted in an attitude of poverty that has nothing to do with being poor; there are many people in this world who are loaded with material wealth, yet constantly feel they lack something. One of the side effects of miserliness is pettiness, and a petty person can never develop the majestic qualities necessary to magnetize others.

¹⁰ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 2 verses 24-25



There is no restriction on the amount of offerings you can make, in fact the sky's the limit. Although 'limitless' offerings sounds, to our ears, as though we should make mountains of elaborately beautiful offerings, that's not what is meant at all; a limitless offering can also be quite small, like the offering made by a little boy called Chandragomi.

Chandragomi's family was so poor that his parents, brothers and sisters were all forced to beg for food to avoid starvation. One day as Chandragomi went about his business, he noticed a statue of Avalokiteshvara in a shrine by the roadside and was so attracted to the statue's compassionate expression that he sprinkled a few grains of the rice he'd managed to collect that morning onto the statue's hand. To his surprise, however careful he made his offering, the grains of rice kept sliding off the statue and into the dust. He offered a few more grains, and once again they slid off the statue's hand and onto the road. Chandragomi began to worry that for some reason Avalokiteshvara didn't want to accept his offering, and kept digging deeper and deeper into his pockets to find more rice to offer, until finally he had nothing left. By now Chandragomi was quite upset and with tears in his eyes he said to Avalokiteshvara, with great regret, "But now I have nothing left to offer." At that moment the power of the boy's one-pointed trust that Avalokiteshvara was actually there in front of him caused the statue to come to life and comfort him with an enormous hug.

Making material offerings is, obviously, something we should all do, but perhaps the offerings we imagine are more important. Visualize in your mind's eye mountains of all the traditional offering substances, as well as anything else you can think of that's beautiful or expensive or desirable or extraordinary, for example the Niagara Falls in Canada or the Forbidden City in Beijing, an elegantly seductive geisha dancer or a burly uniformed U.S. marine. Really let your imagination fly. And don't limit your offerings to the desirable objects that your own culture admires.

To the Buddhas, those thus gone,
 And to the sacred Dharma, spotless and supremely rare,
 And to the Buddha's offspring, oceans of good qualities,
 That I might gain this precious attitude, I make a perfect offering.

I offer every fruit and flower
 And every kind of healing draft;
 And all the precious gems the world contains,
 With all pure waters of refreshment;

Every mountain wrought of precious jewels;
 All sweet and lonely forest groves;
 The trees of paradise adorned with blossom,
 Trees with branches bowed with perfect fruit;

The perfumed fragrance of the divine and other realms;
 All incense, wishing trees, and trees of gems;
 All crops that grow without the tiller's care
 And every sumptuous object worthy to be offered;

Lakes and meres adorned with lotuses,
 Delightful with the sweet-voiced cries of water birds
 And everything unclaimed and free,
 Extending to the margins of the boundless sky;



I hold them all before my mind, and to the mighty Sage, the greatest of our kind,
 And to his heirs I make a perfect offering.
 Sublime recipients, compassionate lords;
 O think of me with love; accept these gifts of mine!

For I am destitute of merit, I am very poor;
 I have no other wealth. And so, protectors,
 You whose wise intentions are for others' good,
 In your great power, receive them for my sake.

Enlightened ones and all your Bodhisattva heirs,
 I offer you my body throughout all my lives.
 Supreme courageous ones accept me totally.
 For with devotion I will be your slave.

For if you will accept me, I will be
 Undaunted by samsara and will act for beings' sake.
 I'll leave behind the evils of my past,
 And ever after turn my face from them.

A bathing chamber excellently fragrant,
 With even floors of crystal, radiant and clear,
 With graceful pillars shimmering with gems,
 All hung about with gleaming canopies of pearls—

There the blissful Buddhas and their heirs
 I'll bathe with many a precious vase,
 Abrim with water fragrant and delightful
 All to frequent strains of melody and song.

With cloths of unexampled quality,
 With spotless, perfumed towels I will dry them
 And offer splendid scented clothes,
 Well-dyed and of surpassing excellence.

With different garments, light and supple,
 And a hundred beautiful adornments,
 I will grace sublime Samantabhadra,
 Mañjughosha, Lokeshvara, and their kin.

And with a sumptuous fragrance which
 Pervades a thousand million worlds,
 I will anoint the bodies of the mighty Sages,
 Gleaming bright like burnished gold refined and cleansed.



I place before the mighty Sages, perfect objects of my worship,
 Glorious flowers like lotus and mandarava,
 The utpala, and other fragrant blossoms,
 Worked and twined in lovely scented garlands.

I will offer swelling clouds of frankincense,
 Whose ambient perfume ravishes the mind,
 And various foods and every kind of drink,
 All delicacies worthy of the gods.

I will offer precious lamps,
 Arranged in rows on lotuses of gold,
 A carpet of sweet flowers scattering
 Upon the level, incense-sprinkled ground.

To those whose very nature is compassion
 I will give vast palaces, resounding with fair praise,
 All decked with precious pearls and beauteous pendant gems,
 Gleaming jewels that deck the amplitude of space.

Fair and precious parasols adorned with golden shafts
 And bordered around with hems of precious jewels,
 Upright, well-proportioned, pleasing to the eye,
 Again, all this I give to all the Buddhas.

May a host of other offerings,
 And clouds of ravishing sweet melody
 That solaces the pain of living beings
 Arise and constantly abide.

May rains of flowers, every precious gem,
 Fall down in an unceasing rain
 Upon the Jewels of Sacred Dharma,
 Images and all supports for offering.

Just as Mañjughosha and the like
 Made offering to all the Conquerors,
 I do likewise to all the Buddhas our protectors,
 And to all their Bodhisattva children.

To these vast oceans of good qualities.
 I offer praise, a sea of airs and harmonies
 May clouds of tuneful eulogy
 Ascend unceasingly before them.¹¹

¹¹ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 2 verses 1-23



Confession

Next, in order to dismantle your ego's hideout, confess and expose your negative actions; it's one of the most effective ways of countering aggression. If you stow your faults away in some deep, dark hidden place, it's like being seriously ill but not telling the doctor where it hurts; withholding such vital information will prevent the doctor from diagnosing your illness correctly, if at all. Don't worry if you've forgotten some of the things you've done, or if you're not absolutely sure what a negative action is considered to be from a Buddhist perspective, just do your best. Imagine that you're in the presence of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas who know everything that's ever happened in the past, what will happen in the future, and what is happening in the present, and expose everything you're ashamed of having thought and done, or shouldn't have thought or done, and even what you might think and do in the future, without leaving anything out.

If you like, you can recite the following confession from Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*.

To perfect Buddhas and to Bodhisattvas,
 In all directions where they may reside,
 To them who are the sovereigns of great mercy,
 I press my palms together, praying thus:

"In this and all my other lives,
 While turning in the round without beginning,
 Blindly I have brought forth evil,
 And incited others to commit the same.

"Deceived and overmastered by my ignorance,
 I have taken pleasure in such sin.
 And seeing now the blame of it,
 O great protectors, I confess it earnestly!

"Whatever I have done against the Triple Gem
 Against my parents, teachers, and the rest,
 Through force of my defilements,
 In my body, speech, and mind,

"All the evil I, a sinner, have committed,
 All the wicked deeds that cling to me,
 All the frightful things that I contrived,
 I openly declare to you, the teachers of the world."¹²

and

The wrongs that I have done
 Through ignorant stupidity:
 All actions evil by their nature
 And transgressions of the precepts,

¹² Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 2 verses 27-31



Fearing all the pains to come
 I join my palms and ceaselessly prostrate,
 And everything I will confess
 Directly in the sight of my protectors.

I pray you, guides and guardians of the world,
 To take me as I am, a sinful man.
 And all these actions, evil as they are,
 I promise I will never do again.¹³

Rejoicing

Rejoicing at someone else's success is perhaps the easiest way of accumulating merit, it's as if a huge amount of merit is just waiting around for you to pick up. When you see someone do something worthwhile, all you have to do to accumulate oceans of merit is rejoice at their positive action. It's a powerful antidote to the most ridiculous and pathetic emotional response we suffer from, jealousy. Rather than indulge your jealousy, rejoice when you see someone beautiful or successful, and remember that both qualities are the result of their patience and generosity in previous lives.

Similarly, during your pilgrimage think of everyone you know who has good qualities and rejoice in the beneficial things they do, from people who run hospitals to those able to create wonderful flower arrangements. Also rejoice in the results they enjoy, from fame and admiration to good looks. Rejoicing in the activities of the buddhas and bodhisattvas is particularly powerful.

With joy I celebrate the virtue that relieves all beings
 From the sorrows of the states of loss,
 Exulting in the happy states enjoyed
 By those who yet are suffering.

I revel in the stores of virtue
 Cause of gaining the enlightened state,
 And celebrate the freedom won
 By living beings from the round of pain.

And in the Buddhahood of the protectors I delight
 And in the grounds of realization of the Buddhas' heirs.

Their enlightened attitude, an ocean of great good,
 That seeks to place all beings in the state of bliss,
 And every action for the benefit of all:
 Such is my delight and all my joy.¹⁴

¹³ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 2 verses 63-65

¹⁴ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3 verses 1-4



Request the Turning of the Wheel of Dharma

We live in degenerate times. One of the most powerful antidotes both to degeneration and to the root of all our problems, ignorance, is to request that the buddhas and bodhisattvas turn the Wheel of the Dharma.

The Buddha passed into parinivana two and half millennia ago and so you might wonder, what's the point of continually asking him to teach us?

First of all, in everyday life, whenever we have a problem the first thing most of us think of doing is ask someone we respect and trust for help. In this case, the all-pervading problem we face in samsara is fundamental ignorance, and so we should ask someone we are certain knows how to resolve that ignorance. "But why and how can we ask the Buddha?" is most people's immediate reaction. "He isn't alive right now. Will we have to wait for the next Buddha to appear before we get our answer?" Unfortunately, such questions miss the point entirely.

To request that the Wheel of Dharma be turned is not just asking to receive teachings in conventional ways, turning the Wheel can take a great many forms. For example, the Wheel could turn while you're doing something very ordinary, like watching an episode of your favourite soap opera, or when you catch sight of a dead tree, or read a particular passage in a book, because anything that provides the spark to ignite your compassion and realization of the futility of this life is a 'turning of the Wheel'. Time and again, Dharma students have been baffled by sacred texts that, at first glance, they are simply unable to understand. Later on, though, after they've accumulated a little more merit, they try reading the same text again and find they can understand it relatively easily. This is one of the ways the Wheel of Dharma is turned by the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Historically, the Buddha is said to have turned the Wheel of Dharma three times. At the same time, he has promised each and every one of us that whenever we feel devotion he will be right there with us. Which means that the Buddha is turning the Wheel of the Dharma continuously, and such teachings can never be stopped.

And so I join my hands and pray
The Buddhas who reside in every quarter:
Kindle now the Dharma's light
For those who grope, bewildered, in the dark of pain!¹⁵

Request that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas Don't Pass into Parinirvana

Requesting that the buddhas and bodhisattvas remain in samsara and don't pass into parinirvana is how we counter wrong view and doubt. The minds of samsaric beings are dualistic, and dualistic minds are, by nature, full of doubt, which in turn breeds wrong view. Spiritual seekers spend a great deal of time struggling with doubts about their practice, their path and the spiritual way of life; it's probably the toughest challenge most of us have to face. Yet, doubt is the one emotion that will accompany us until the very end of our spiritual journey. It is believed that our doubts become sharper the more our intelligence increases, which makes perfect sense because the more intelligent we are, the more intelligent our doubts become. The fact we have so many doubts is one of our biggest obstacles, mostly because they take up so much of our time. The worse it gets, the more likely we are to find ourselves stuck in a state of serial self-condemnation, which in turn diverts our attention from the right view, causing loss of faith in the laws of cause, condition and effect (karma), and corroding our belief in the ultimate truth of interdependent reality, emptiness and the Triple Gem.

¹⁵ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3 verse 5



Doubts invade the mind in a wide variety of ways. You may wonder why, having completed hundreds of Dharma practices your health is so poor. Or, if the buddhas are omniscient, what's stopping them from eliminating HIV Aids, or poverty, or WMDs? Do they have any power at all? Is there really a 'next life'? Do any of us truly have buddha nature? Many such doubts can be cleared away simply by listening to the teachings, but most human beings also need some kind of inspiration that has nothing to do with reasoning or logic to give them confidence, like an extraordinary experience, or meeting someone inspiring. Usually meeting a Buddhist master, the physical manifestation of the Buddha's body, speech and mind that we can see, touch and hear is the very best kind of inspiration—"seeing is believing". And we're not only asking fully-fledged buddhas with all thirty-two major and eighty minor marks to remain in samsara; we're asking that those who embody all the great qualities of buddhas and bodhisattvas—who are the source of inspiration for others, and who embody the teachings—to remain in this world, along with all the events and activities, however illogical or impractical, that uplift and encourage us.

I join my hands beseeching the enlightened ones
 Who wish to pass into nirvana:
 Do not leave us in our ignorance;
 Remain among us for unnumbered ages!¹⁶

Dedication

Finally, we must always dedicate our practice and positive actions quickly so that we don't waste any of the merit we accumulate. By dedicating our merit towards the ultimate happiness and enlightenment of all sentient beings, we not only keep that merit safe, but ensure that it will continue to accumulate—like interest on money in the bank—so that our positive actions become our path to enlightenment. If we don't dedicate immediately, the merit could be burned away by a sudden flash of anger, or any of the other extreme negative actions or thoughts to which we are prey.

Through these actions now performed,
 And all the virtue I have gained,
 May all the pain of every living being
 Be wholly scattered and destroyed!

For all those ailing in the world,
 Until their every sickness has been healed,
 May I myself become for them
 The doctor, nurse, the medicine itself.

Raining down a flood of food and drink,
 May I dispel the ills of thirst and famine.
 And in the aeons marked by scarcity and want,
 May I myself appear as drink and sustenance.

For sentient beings, poor and destitute,
 May I become a treasure ever-plentiful,
 And lie before them closely in their reach,
 A varied source of all that they might need.¹⁷

¹⁶ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3 verse 6

¹⁷ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3 verses 7-10



Offering Substances

Clean water is an extremely popular offering substance and you'll see many sets of water offerings in temples or at shrines. Apart from symbolizing purification, water is also vital for life in all its shapes and forms.

One of the important mental attitudes we need to cultivate as we make an offering is that we have no attachment to it whatsoever, and feel no trace of regret when it leaves our possession. Our minds are fickle, and however beneficial our activities, when we balance the books at the end of the month we may, for an instant, regret having offered 10,000 lights and wish we'd limited ourselves to 5,000. Offering water, by comparison, costs very little, and there's therefore less chance that we'll regret doing it.

I offer every fruit and flower
 Every kind of healing draft;
 And all the precious gems the world contains,
 With all pure waters of refreshment,¹⁸

Light offerings are also very popular and heavy with spiritual symbolism. The reason we follow the Buddha's teachings is that we long to achieve enlightenment, which will only happen once we've tamed or trained our minds. Just as light illuminates the space around it so that others can see, and also illuminates itself, mind not only knows others, but also knows itself. For this reason, a lamp is the closest simile we have to mind, and therefore anything that has the power to dispel darkness can be used as an offering substance.

I will offer precious lamps,
 Arranged in rows on lotuses of gold,
 A carpet of sweet flowers scattering
 Upon the level, incense-sprinkled ground.¹⁹

Mandala Offering

A mandala symbolizes the entire universe and the purest forms of everything in it. We offer everything our minds can grasp or imagine, for example the earth, water, mountains, rivers, cities; all the wealth in this world, and of the gods and asuras; everything considered precious, like gold and diamonds; everything considered strong, like elephants; and everything considered auspicious, like kusha grass or yoghurt. Traditionally, the Tibetan ritual involves offering a mandala plate, rice and precious stones, etc, but it's also possible to make offerings simply by sprinkling rice, or better still, flower petals. As you do so, recite whichever Mandala Offering prayer you like, for example,

The ground is purified with scented water and strewn with flowers
 It is adorned with Sumeru, the king of mountains, the four quarters of the universe,
 and the sun and the moon;

¹⁸ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 2 verse 2

¹⁹ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 2 verse 17



Thinking of it as the blessed buddha-fields, I offer it.

By virtue of this offering, may all beings here and now attain the happiness of that pure land!²⁰

tram guru ratna mandala pudza megha samudra saparana samaye ah hung

Bodhichitta and Taking the Bodhisattva Vow

Although the label 'bodhisattva' sounds impressive and difficult to achieve, it simply means the 'child' or 'heir of the Buddha', and it isn't difficult to achieved; there are no exams to pass or impossible tasks to accomplish. All you have to do is invoke a heart-felt wish that you will bring all sentient beings to complete enlightenment. Where better to make such a vow than at one of Buddha's holy places in the presence of holy representations and objects? So take full advantage of your time at each of these sites by making the Bodhisattva Vow. As Shantideva wrote,

Should bodhichitta come to birth
 In those who suffer, chained in prisons of samsara,
 In that instant they are called the children of the Blissful One,
 Revered by all the world, by gods and humankind.²¹

and

As though they pass through perils guarded by a hero,
 Even those weighed down with dreadful wickedness
 Will instantly be freed through having bodhichitta.
 Why do those who fear their sins not have recourse to it?²²

No matter how imperfect, impure and addicted to samsara you consider yourself to be, as a human being it is just not possible that you've never had a single good thought—once in a blue moon it must have happened. As Shantideva wrote,

Just as on a dark night black with clouds,
 The sudden lightning glares and all is clearly shown,
 Likewise rarely, through the Buddha's power,
 Virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient, in the world.²³

However transient the virtuous thought, it is the seed of bodhichitta. If, though, at the moment you take the Bodhisattva Vow a good thought doesn't arise naturally in your mind, fake it! Make one up, and don't despise yourself or the fake thought for being inauthentic. Even a fake good thought is better than none at all, and it's the contrived good thought that will eventually lead to a genuine one.

²⁰ translation by Rigpa Translations.

²¹ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 1 verse 9

²² Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 1 verse 13

²³ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 1 verse 5



Bodhichitta is the love, compassion and benevolence that can, under certain circumstances, arise in the minds of human beings, and when it does it is unspeakably beautiful. For the causes and circumstances that allow the arousal of this beautiful mind, we generally require a great deal of merit. So, having taken refuge and recited the Seven-Branch Prayer, we're in the perfect position either to take the vow of a bodhisattva, or to practise bodhichitta.

As this may be the only time you ever find yourself at this holy site, don't waste the opportunity of making the Bodhisattva Vow in the presence of these holy images. It's not necessary to take the vow in the presence of your teacher or of a holy person, but if there happens to be a monk, lama or lay practitioner in the vicinity who is qualified to offer you the Bodhisattva Vow, by all means receive it from them.

Most holy sites are packed with holy objects, like statues of the Buddha and sacred Dharma texts, and taking refuge in the presence of all these representations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas is a very good idea.

To make the **Bodhisattva Vow**, first offer some flowers, incense and lights. A flower won't grow until a seed has been planted in the earth; only then will it sprout a shoot and eventually blossom into a flower. This is a good analogy for the generation of bodhichitta in the mind of a practitioner. In order for the seed of bodhichitta to flourish in our minds we must first plant it in the earth of merit. Practically speaking the most important element to develop is the bodhichitta of aspiration, so that from this moment on, your entire life and everything you do will be aimed at accomplishing the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Then recite the following verses from Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*.

The Bodhisattva Vow

Just as all the Buddhas of the past
Have brought forth the awakened mind
And in the precepts of the Bodhisattvas
Step-by-step abode and trained,

Likewise, for the benefit of beings,
I will bring to birth the awakened mind,
And in those precepts, step-by-step,
I will abide and train myself.²⁴

Recite this stanza once or as many times as you have time for, and contemplate it. If you find yourself wondering, "How could I ever become a bodhisattva? I'd never be able to cut off my limbs and feed them to a hungry tiger!" don't allow yourself to become disheartened, because, as Shantideva writes, "...step by step, I will abide and train myself."

Now that you've made the vow of a bodhisattva congratulate yourself on having done something truly worthwhile that you can be extremely happy about. Allow yourself to value and be encouraged by what you've just done; let the memory of it enhance your mood; and constantly remind yourself that today you have every reason to be happy. Shantideva's words will help.

Those who thus with clear intelligence
Take hold of the awakened mind with bright and lucid joy,
That they may now increase what they have gained,
Should lift their hearts with praises such as these:

²⁴ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3 verses 23-24



“Today my life has given fruit.
This human state has now been well assumed.
Today I take my birth in the Buddha's line,
And have become the Buddha's child and heir.

“In every way, then, I will undertake
Activities befitting such a rank.
And I will do no act to mar
Or compromise this high and faultless lineage.

“For I am like a blind man who has found
A precious gem inside a heap of dust.
For so it is, by some strange chance,
That bodhichitta has been born in me.

“This is the supreme draft of immortality,
That slays the Lord of Death, the slaughterer of beings,
The rich unfailing treasure-mine
To heal the poverty of wanderers.

“It is the sovereign remedy,
That perfectly allays all maladies.
It is the tree gives relief
To those who wander wearily the pathways of existence.

“It is the universal vehicle that saves
All wandering beings from the states of loss,
The rising moon of the enlightened mind
That soothes the sorrows born of the afflictions.

“It is a mighty sun that utterly dispels
The misty and ignorance of wandering beings,
The creamy butter, rich and full,
That's churned from milk of holy teaching.

Now you have ennobled yourself as a bodhisattva, with the confidence and joy that being a bodhisattva brings
you can now declare your new self to all sentient beings.

“Living beings! Wayfarers upon life's paths,
Who wish to taste the riches of contentment,
Here before you is the supreme bliss—
Here, O ceaseless wanderers, is your fulfilment!

“And so, today, within the sight of all protectors,
I summon beings, calling them to Buddhahood—
And, till that state is reached, to every earthly joy!
May gods and demigods and all the rest rejoice!”²⁵

²⁵ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3 verses 25-34



Next, the **Four Immeasurable Thoughts**. In this practice you make the wish that all sentient beings will always be happy and free from suffering, and perhaps more importantly, that they will always enjoy the causes of happiness and freedom from suffering, and never be separate from happiness. Finally, you wish that all sentient beings will be free from judgement, for example that they will no longer distinguish friends from enemies and instead practise complete equanimity. The practice of equanimity is very close to that of ultimate bodhichitta.

You might also have time to practise **Tonglen**. In this practice, as you breathe in, visualise taking on all the pain and anxiety of all sentient beings; and as you breathe out, visualise giving them all your happiness, bliss, love and wisdom.

My body, thus, and all my goods besides,
And all my merits gained and to be gained,
I give them all and do not count the cost,
To bring about the benefit of beings.²⁶

To practise the **Bodhichitta of Application**, for now, consider that the pilgrimage you've made to the holy sites and your offerings of water, lights and incense are your first steps towards putting bodhichitta into action.

As for **Ultimate Bodhichitta**, if you've received teachings on how to do this practice, do it now; if you haven't, read *The Heart Sutra* through once.

The Sutra of the Heart of Transcendent Knowledge

Thus have I heard.

Once the Blessed One was dwelling in Rajagriha at Vulture Peak mountain, together with a great gathering of the sangha of monks and a great gathering of the sangha of bodhisattvas.

At that time the Blessed One entered the samadhi that expresses the dharma called "profound illumination," and at the same time noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva mahasattva, while practicing the profound prajñāparamita, saw in this way: he saw the five skandhas to be empty of nature.

Then, through the power of the Buddha, venerable Shariputra said to noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva mahasattva, "How should a son or daughter of noble family train, who wishes to practice the profound prajñāparamita?"

Addressed in this way, noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva mahasattva, said to venerable Shariputra, "O Shariputra, a son or daughter of noble family who wishes to practice the profound prajñāparamita should see in this way: Seeing the five skandhas to be empty of nature.

Form is empty;

Emptiness also is form.

Emptiness is no other than form;

Form is no other than emptiness.

In the same way, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness are empty.

Thus, Shariputra, all dharmas are emptiness. There are no characteristics.

There is no birth and no cessation.

There is no impurity and no purity. There is no decrease and no increase.

Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness, there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no formation, no consciousness;

²⁶ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3 verse 11



No eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind;
 No appearance, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no dharmas;
 No eye dhatu up to no mind dhatu, no dhatu of dharmas, no mind consciousness dhatu;
 No ignorance, no end of ignorance up to no old age and death, no end of old age and death;
 No suffering, no origin of suffering, no cessation of suffering, no path, no wisdom, no attainment, and
 no non-attainment.

Therefore, Sariputra, since the bodhisattvas have no attainment, they abide by means of prajñāparamita.
 Since there is no obscuration of mind, there is no fear. They transcend falsity and attain complete
 nirvana.

All the buddhas of the three times, by means of prajñāparamita, fully awaken to unsurpassable, true,
 complete enlightenment.

Therefore, the great mantra of prajñāparamita, the mantra of great insight, the unsurpassed mantra, the
 unequalled mantra, the mantra that calms all suffering should be known as truth, since there is no
 deception.

The prajñāparamita mantra is said in this way:

om gaté gaté paragaté parasamgaté bodhi svaha

Thus, Shariputra, the bodhisattva mahasattva should train in the profound prajñāparamita.”

Then the Blessed One arose from that samadhi and praised noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva
 mahasattva, saying, “Good, good,

O son of noble family; thus it is, O son of noble family, thus it is. One should practice the profound
 prajñāparamita just as you have taught and all the tathagatas will rejoice.”

When the Blessed One had said this, venerable Shariputra and noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva
 mahasattva, that whole assembly and the world with its gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas
 rejoiced and praised the words of the Blessed One.²⁷

Then, as a kind of appetizer for the practice of ultimate bodhichitta, sit and watch your thoughts coming and
 going, without judging them.

There are also countless other methods available to us for accumulating merit, for example:

- mending public roads and bridges;
- offering money, food and shelter to the poor, offering information, even a smile;
- remembering the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha);
- taking vows;
- contemplating love, compassion and truth;
- practising patience; and
- meditating on wisdom.

The Buddha himself recommended each and every one of these methods, and said that when practised with the
 right motivation they can all bear the fruit of incalculable virtue, but for laypeople it's best to focus on being
 generous, disciplined and patient.

²⁷ Lotsawa bhikshu Rinchen De translated this text into Tibetan with the Indian pandita Vimalamitra. It was edited by the great editor-
 lotsawas Gelo, Namkha, and others. This Tibetan text was copied from the fresco in Gegye Chemaling at the glorious Samye vihara. It has
 been translated into English by the Nalanda Translation Committee under the direction of Vidyadhara the Venerable Chögyam Trungpa
 Rinpoche, with reference to several Sanskrit editions.

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Generosity involves any and all categories of giving to others, for example giving money, or space, or protection. Pilgrims can be generous by offering flowers and incense, etc.

Discipline, according to Buddhist practice, always involves not harming others and is a practice that accumulates an abundance of merit. If possible, in addition to not harming try also to engage in the discipline of helping others. While discipline isn't limited to not smoking, not eating pasta, or not drinking vast quantities of whisky in an attempt to remain healthy, for a pilgrim, it's quite a good idea to vow that during your pilgrimage you won't eat meat or drink alcohol.

Patience, according to Shantideva, is the quickest and most powerful way to accumulate merit. Pilgrims always have plenty of opportunities to practise patience, especially in India. One of the most efficient methods is to consider everyone you meet to be a bodhisattva. Since it's impossible to tell just by looking at someone whether or not they're bodhisattvas or buddhas, simply don't discriminate.

Alternatively, the next time your plans are disrupted—perhaps your bus or train is delayed, which happens all the time in India—think to yourself, “If I don't have enough patience to deal with something this trivial, how on earth will I ever be able to bear the fires of hell?”

Pilgrimage sites don't only attract pilgrims, they're also a magnet for a great army of opportunists, like beggars who exhibit stumps instead of legs during the day that miraculously grow back in time for them to walk home at night, and con-artists dressed as monks. How you respond to all these opportunities to give is entirely up to you. You might, for example, decide not to give anything to beggars during your pilgrimage and instead give all your spare cash to the worst-off beggars in the big cities who have less chance of keeping themselves fed and safe; or to women, as their lives are far harder than those of men. Rather than giving money that might be spent on alcohol or drugs, you could give food and clothes, or simply offer heart-felt prayers for all those caught in the poverty trap. Or you might choose to give money to absolutely anyone who asks for it whether they appear to deserve it or not.

From a spiritual point of view, your attitude to the person to whom you're giving is very important. Always try to remember that, whoever they may be in this life, in a previous life they were people you loved and who loved you, and every one of them has shed tears or blood on your behalf, or may even have sacrificed their life trying to protect you. As we have no idea whether or not the people we meet are bodhisattvas—buddhas can appear in so many different forms—to be on the safe side just imagine that everyone to whom you give is an enlightened being. This is even more important for tantric practitioners who have vowed to consider absolutely everyone to be a deity and everywhere they go a mandala. If we give to others with these kinds of thoughts in our minds, our practice of generosity will become far more profound.

So, as a Shravakayana practitioner, when you see a beggar sitting, half-naked on the dirty streets, try to empathize with him by putting yourself in his position and imagining how much you would suffer if you had to sleep in filthy alleyways and could eat only what others throw away. Then, when you offer him money or food you will do so with the natural respect due to a fellow human being, someone who is just like you but whose situation in life is far less fortunate.

As a Bodhisattvayana practitioner, remember that throughout countless lifetimes you've been connected with this beggar, who must have been your mother or father or lover or husband many times over. Then, however meagre your offering, make it with the wish that the karmic link you are creating will somehow lead the beggar to the Dharma.

If possible, also try to remember that you, the beggar and the offering are all an illusion, and in this way the simple act of tossing him a coin will become the most profound practice of generosity.

A tantric practitioner would give having imagined that the beggar is none other than their guru or yidam deity.

As for giving to monks and nuns, both authentic and fake, the merit you accumulate is far more dependent on your motivation than their true status. Beggars often have heart-breaking histories and it's entirely possible that the fake monk standing in front of you has donned robes in a last desperate attempt to feed his family,



or because his mother is terminally ill and needs medicine to help manage her pain. So, don't be too quick to condemn the fraudulent monks, and bear in mind that plenty of so-called 'real' monks drive a Mercedes-Benz, or wear a Rolex watch or Tiffany gold chain. Instead of being suspicious of and finding fault with everyone you meet, simply respecting and venerating a monk's robes (which symbolize the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) even when the monk himself is a fake, will accumulate a great deal of merit.

While he was still a bodhisattva, one of the Buddha's incarnations was as an animal with beautiful blue fur that had an innate fondness for monks and always ran up to them and nestled into their yellow robes. One day, a cunning hunter disguised himself as a monk and hid a poisoned arrow in the folds of his robes, so when the animal scampered up and threw itself into his lap, he killed it with a single blow. It sounds like a tragic story, except for the fact that the animal accumulated aeons' worth of merit in that moment for its attraction to the monk's robes.

During a pilgrimage, visiting temples provides plenty of opportunities for practising each one of the Six Paramitas:

- offering what you can afford is the practice of **generosity**;
- making offerings modestly, without attracting anyone's attention, or showing off, or for other worldly reasons, is the practice of **discipline**;
- if the caretakers at the temple harass you into giving more than you intended, harbouring no ill will towards them is the practice of **patience**;
- making offerings joyfully is the practice of **diligence**;
- not getting distracted by your own vanity, insecurity and pride, and so on, while you make offerings is the practice of **samadhi**; and
- considering everything you've offered, large or small, to be no more than a dream or an illusion is the practice of **wisdom**.

Aspiration

As beginners, no matter what we do, our spiritual path will always, crudely speaking, be a path of make-believe. In Buddhism there are many kinds of spiritual path—for example, the paths of renunciation, of devotion, of compassion, etc.—but it's extremely difficult *truly* to experience all these paths all of the time. The advice we are given by the great masters of the past is to start by making the aspiration that one day we will feel genuine renunciation, devotion, compassion, etc. By doing so, we accumulate a tremendous amount of merit.

Once an old woman saw a rich merchant offer the Buddha and his entire entourage a sumptuous lunch. As she gazed on the beautifully decorated table, the golden plates and hundreds of exquisitely arranged dishes, she wished again and again that she could make such an offering, but being almost destitute herself, had no money to finance her aspiration. Yet with that wish and aspiration alone, she is said to have accumulated an immeasurable amount of merit.

The practice of aspiration is particularly geared to those of us who don't have the wisdom to understand the nature of emptiness and consequently are still subject to time, space, direction, quantity and quality. It's a practice for limited beings who are only able to make believe that the enlightenment of all sentient beings is even a possibility; trying to help just one person on a worldly level quickly exhausts most of us, and so the idea of helping *all* sentient beings *forever and ever* seems so outlandish as to be a poetic fantasy. However, such a short-sighted view is simply the result of a lack of wisdom.



The *Prajñāparamita Sutra* tells of a bodhisattva who, after years struggling to follow the bodhisattva path, told the Buddha how discouraged he felt when he considered just how long it would take to attain enlightenment and of the infinite number of sentient beings who were yet to be liberated. The Buddha responded with an analogy. Imagine a mother dreams that her only child is swept away by the powerful currents of a fast-moving river. She is entirely powerless, yet, in her agony and desperation, she would willingly do absolutely anything in order to save the child regardless of her own welfare and safety, and would even sacrifice her own life to save his. How long it might take to save him is entirely irrelevant to her, and the amount of effort required isn't even a consideration. Ultimately her strength and single-minded determination are so great that she succeeds in pulling the child out of the river. Then she wakes up, and all the pain she endured, all the immense effort she made and all the time she invested in saving her child have never existed; even the idea that she had saved her son's life is an illusion.

We have yet to develop the wisdom to recognize the illusory nature of samsara, and so we imagine our world and the people in it are real, permanent and truly existing. As a result we are entirely overwhelmed, and find we are unable to summon up the courage to meet the challenge of even attempting to liberate all sentient beings. However, we do have enough merit to long to follow the path of a bodhisattva. So how do we begin? How do we find a way to set out on what we're quite sure will prove to be an impossible mission? Like everything else on the Buddhist path, we start by arousing the right motivation, and then reinforce it with aspiration. This is why when you're on a pilgrimage, if nothing else, you should try to recite prayers of aspiration over and over again.

May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,
 A guide for those who journey on the road.
 For those who wish to cross the water,
 May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge.

May I be an isle for those who yearn for land
 A lamp for those who long for light;
 For all who need a resting place, a bed;
 For all who need a servant, may I be their slave.

May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of wealth,
 A word of power and the supreme healing;
 May I be the tree of miracles,
 For every being the abundant cow.

Just like the earth and space itself,
 And all the other mighty elements,
 For boundless multitudes of beings,
 May I be the ground of life, the source of varied sustenance.

Thus for every thing that lives,
 As far as are the limits of the sky,
 May I provide their livelihood and nourishment
 Until they pass beyond the bonds of suffering.²⁸

²⁸ Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3 verses 18-22



The great Longchenpa said that baby birds don't fly well because their wings are small and they have yet to gain strength and agility; similarly, without omniscience it's difficult to be of help to anyone. Therefore, for the time being think only of your own Dharma practice and enlightenment, and then in a quiet place, aspire to benefit others. This is none other than the practice of **relative bodhichitta**.

Bodhichitta of application, or **application bodhichitta**, is the activity of a bodhisattva; it's what you actually do to help others. For most of us it's difficult to fulfil the wishes of just one sentient being day after day—our partner, or child, or a parent—so to consider attempting the amazingly unselfish activities of a bodhisattva to help all other beings is way too much for most people even to think about, let alone put into action. How many of us can imagine ourselves being infinitely generous, perfectly disciplined, untiringly patient, etc. with absolutely everyone? The stories we hear about bodhisattvas seem about as real as the lost city of Atlantis or unicorns, and can you imagine doing what Buddha did during one of his five hundred lives as a bodhisattva and offering his body to a hungry tigress so she could feed her cubs? Such ideas won't fit into our logical, well-educated minds, and our selfishness and self-obsession are so strong they block all possibility of understanding such a selfless act. And to abandon our children, our partners, our parents, our home? No, it's all absolutely unthinkable!

Practising the bodhichitta of application isn't easy. The bodhichitta of aspiration, on the other hand, is extremely simple and doesn't cost anything at all, which makes it a much more appropriate, safe and easy method for beginners like us to adopt who wish to become bodhisattvas and need all the help we can get.

While aspiration is very important on the spiritual path. Perhaps even more important is to know what we should be aspiring for. Beginners tend to be a little ignorant about this because they don't really know what's good for them; fewer still know what's bad for them; and as for what it is they really need, they're utterly clueless. Fortunately, the great masters of the past have some very good advice on this subject: emulate the great bodhisattvas. Shantideva, for example, wrote,

To satisfy the needs of beings
 Dwelling in the ten directions, to the margins of the sky,
 May I reflect in all my deeds
 The perfect exploits of Mañjushri²⁹

Many prayers of aspiration have been composed by sublime beings of the past. Among them is *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's 'Aspiration to Good Actions'*, from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which is considered to be the supreme of all aspiration prayers, and includes the following verses,

The eldest of the sons of all the buddhas
 Is called Samantabhadra: 'All-good':
 So that I may act with a skill like his,
 I dedicate fully all these merits!

To purify my body, my speech and my mind as well,
 To purify my actions, and all realms,
 May I be the equal of Samantabhadra
 In his skill in good dedication!

In order to perform the full virtue of Good Actions,
 I shall act according to Mañjushri's prayers of aspiration,
 And without ever growing weary, in all the aeons to come,
 I shall perfectly fulfil every one of his aims!³⁰

29 Shantideva, *op. cit.*, Chapter 10 v.54

30 Translation www.lotsawahouse.org



If reciting words written by someone else feels inauthentic to you, try coming up with some of your own, or you could adjust an existing prayer so it more closely reflects what you want to say. For example,

Whatever the Buddha taught,
Effortlessly may it enter my being, and
Effortlessly may I understand it.³¹

This is a very important kind of aspiration. The Dharma is so vast and profound that at times it's beyond our comprehension, and although it's popularly believed that studying brings an understanding of Dharma, in fact, ultimate understanding can only be achieved through the blessings of the buddhas. This is why we pray that an understanding of the Dharma, which is necessary for our own enlightenment as well as that of everyone else, will arise effortlessly in our minds.

Aspire not only to understand the Dharma intellectually, but to understand it experientially.

Aspire to embody ultimate and relative bodhichitta, so that it's not just your good looks, knowledge and political clout that attract and magnetize sentient beings.

Aspire to create connections with people—even those who catch no more than a glimpse of your brightly coloured T-shirt in a crowd—that result in the seed of Dharma being sown in their minds.

Aspire for the continued flourishing of the Buddhadharma and pray that an abundance of great Dharma holders emerge who will be free of obstacles in their efforts to liberate all sentient beings.

Aspire that your body, your bearing, your ideas and thoughts all, in one way or another, become beneficial to sentient beings. For example, if I suddenly had an urge to check the state of the stock market, may that mundane thought mature into a beneficial manifestation.

Aspire never to be reborn into the family of a billionaire, as such circumstances would mean you only see a rosy picture of the world and deprive you of the wealth of understanding the Dharma. At the same time, aspire to become President of the United States, or of China or Russia, so you can skilfully benefit sentient beings with the powers that job brings you.

Aspire to become a prostitute in a seedy red-light district of a major city, and for bodhichitta to be born in the minds of anyone with whom you become acquainted.

Aspire to practise the Dharma thoroughly and completely and pray that you will not always be waiting for the right time to start practising. When you have time, go somewhere quiet and practise.

Aspire never to put off practising what you already know because you want to gain more intellectual Dharma knowledge.

Aspire to experience sadness.

Aspire always to take the right direction, however ignorant you may be. Pray that when you chase after meaningless desires, the object of your desire will lead you to benefit sentient beings. When you lose your temper, may you feel embarrassed at your behaviour and gain some realisation. When you feel depressed, may that very depression be the cause for you to realise the truth.

And most important of all, always *aspire to aspire*.

31 Guru Padmasambhava's Aspiration Prayer translated by DJKN



APPENDIX

The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's "Aspiration To Good Actions"

In the language of India: *Arya Bhadracarya Pranidhana Raja*

In the language of Tibet: *Pakpa Zangpo Chöpe Mönlam gyi Gyalpo*

In the English language: *The King of Aspiration Prayers: Samantabhadra's 'Aspiration To Good Actions'*

The Translators' Homage

Homage to Mañjushri, the youthful!

The Seven Preliminaries for Purifying the Mind

To all the buddhas, the lions of the human race,
In all directions of the universe, through past and present and future:
To every single one of you, I bow in homage;
Devotion fills my body, speech and mind.

Through the power of this prayer, aspiring to Good Action,
All the victorious ones appear, vivid here before my mind
And I multiply my body as many times as atoms in the universe,
Each one bowing in prostration to all the buddhas.

In every atom preside as many buddhas as there are atoms,
And around them, all their bodhisattva heirs:
And so I imagine them filling
Completely the entire space of reality.

Saluting them with an endless ocean of praise,
With the sounds of an ocean of different melodies
I sing of the buddhas' noble qualities,
And praise all those who have gone to perfect bliss.

To every buddha, I make offerings:
Of the loveliest flowers, of beautiful garlands,
Of music and perfumed ointments, the best of parasols,
The brightest lamps and finest incense.



To every buddha, I make offerings:
 Exquisite garments and the most fragrant scents,
 Powdered incense, heaped as high as Mount Meru,
 Arranged in perfect symmetry.

Then the vast and unsurpassable offerings—
 Inspired by my devotion to all the buddhas, and
 Moved by the power of my faith in Good Actions—
 I prostrate and offer to all you victorious ones.

Whatever negative acts I have committed,
 While driven by desire, hatred and ignorance,
 With my body, my speech and also with my mind,
 Before you, I confess and purify each and every one.

With a heart full of delight, I rejoice at all the merits
 Of buddhas and bodhisattvas,
 Pratyekabuddhas, those in training and the arhats beyond training,
 And every living being, throughout the entire universe.

You who are like beacons of light shining through the worlds,
 Who passed through the stages of enlightenment, to attain buddhahood, freedom from all attachment,
 I exhort you: all of you protectors,
 Turn the unsurpassable wheel of Dharma.

Joining my palms together, I pray
 To you who intend to pass into nirvana,
 Remain, for aeons as many as the atoms in this world,
 And bring well-being and happiness to all living beings.

What little virtue I have gathered through my homage,
 Through offering, confession, and rejoicing,
 Through exhortation and prayer—all of it
 I dedicate to the enlightenment of beings!

The Actual Aspiration

1. Aspiration for Purity of Attitude

Let offerings be made to buddhas of the past,
 And all who now dwell throughout the ten directions of this universe!
 Let all who are yet to come swiftly fulfil their wishes
 And attain the stages of enlightenment and buddhahood!

Let as many worlds as there are in all the ten directions
 Transform into realms that are vast and utterly pure,
 Filled with buddhas who have sat before the mighty bodhi tree,
 Around them all their bodhisattva sons and daughters!



Let as many sentient beings as there are in all the ten directions
 Live always and forever in happiness and health!
 Let all beings meet the Dharma
 That befits them best! And so may all they hope for be fulfilled!

2. Aspiration Never to Forget the Bodhicitta

As I practise the training for enlightenment,
 May I recall all my previous births,
 And in my successive lives, through death and through rebirth,
 May I always renounce the worldly life!

Training in the footsteps of all the victorious buddhas,
 May I bring Good Actions to perfection,
 And my moral conduct be taintless and pure,
 Never lapsing, and always free from fault!

In the language of the gods, nagas, and yakshas,
 In the language of demons and of humans too,
 In however many kinds of speech there may be—
 I shall proclaim the Dharma in the language of all!

Taming my mind, and striving in the paramitas,
 I will never forget the bodhicitta;
 May all my harmful actions and the obscurations they cause
 Be completely purified, every single one!

3. Aspiration to be Free from Defilements

May I be freed from karma, harmful emotions, and the work of negativity,
 And act for all beings in the world,
 Just like the lotus flower to which mud and water cannot cling,
 Or sun and moon that course unhindered through the sky.

4. Aspiration to Lead Beings to Happiness

Throughout the reach and range of the entire universe
 I shall pacify completely the suffering of all the lower realms,
 I shall lead all beings to happiness,
 And work for the ultimate benefit of each and every one!

5. Aspiration to Wear the Armour of Dedication

I shall bring enlightened action to perfection,
 Serve beings so as to suit their needs,
 Teach them to accomplish Good Actions,
 And continue this, throughout all the aeons to come!



6. Aspiration to Accompany other Bodhisattvas

May I always meet and be accompanied by
 Those whose actions accord with mine;
 And in body, speech and mind as well,
 May our actions and aspirations always be one!

7. Aspiration to Have Virtuous Teachers and to Please Them

May I always meet spiritual friends
 Who long to be of true help to me,
 And who teach me the Good Actions;
 Never will I disappoint them!

8. Aspiration to See the Buddhas and Serve them in Person

May I always behold the buddhas, here before my eyes,
 And around them all their bodhisattva sons and daughters.
 Without ever tiring, throughout all the aeons to come,
 May the offerings I make them be endless and vast!

9. Aspiration to Keep the Dharma Thriving

May I maintain the sacred teachings of the buddhas,
 And cause enlightened action to appear;
 May I train to perfection in Good Actions,
 And practise these in every age to come!

10. Aspiration to Acquire Inexhaustible Treasure

As I wander through all states of samsaric existence,
 May I gather inexhaustible merit and wisdom,
 And so become an inexhaustible treasury of noble qualities—
 Of skill and discernment, samadhi and liberation!

11. Aspiration to the Different Methods for Entering Into the 'Good Actions'

a) Seeing the Buddhas and their Pure Realms

In a single atom may I see as many pure realms as atoms in the universe:
 And in each realm, buddhas beyond all imagining,
 Encircled by all their bodhisattva heirs.
 Along with them, may I perform the actions of enlightenment!

And so, in each direction, everywhere,
 Even on the tip of a hair, may I see an ocean of buddhas—
 All to come in past, present and future—in an ocean of pure realms,
 And throughout an ocean of aeons, may I enter into enlightened action in each and every one!



b) Listening to the Speech of the Buddhas

Each single word of a buddha's speech, that voice with its ocean of qualities,
Bears all the purity of the speech of all the buddhas,
Sounds that harmonize with the minds of all living beings:
May I always be engaged with the speech of the buddhas!

c) Hearing the Turning of the Wheels of Dharma

With all the power of my mind, may I hear and realize
The inexhaustible melody of the teachings spoken by
All the buddhas of past, present and future,
As they turn the wheels of Dharma!

d) Entering into All the Aeons

Just as the wisdom of the buddhas penetrates all future aeons,
So may I too know them, instantly,
And in each fraction of an instant may I know
All that will ever be, in past, present and future!

e) Seeing all the Buddhas in One Instant

In an instant, may I behold all those who are the lions of the human race—
The buddhas of past, present and future!

f). Entering the Sphere of Activity of the Buddhas

May I always be engaged in the buddhas' way of life and action,
Through the power of liberation, where all is realized as like an illusion!

g) Accomplishing and Entering the Pure Lands

On a single atom, may I actually bring about
The entire array of pure realms of past, of present and future;
And then enter into those pure buddha realms
In each atom, and in each and every direction.

h) Entering into the Presence of the Buddhas

When those who illuminate the world, still to come,
Gradually attain buddhahood, turn the Wheel of Dharma,
And demonstrate the final, profound peace of nirvana:
May I be always in their presence!



12. Aspiration to the Power of Enlightenment through Nine Powers

Through the power of swift miracles,
 The power of the vehicle, like a doorway,
 The power of conduct that possesses all virtuous qualities,
 The power of loving kindness, all-pervasive,

The power of merit that is totally virtuous,
 The power of wisdom free from attachment, and
 The powers of knowledge, skilful means and samadhi,
 May I perfectly accomplish the power of enlightenment!

13. Aspiration to the Antidotes that Pacify the Obscurations

May I purify the power of karma;
 Destroy the power of harmful emotions;
 Render negativity utterly powerless;
 And perfect the power of Good Actions!

14. Aspiration to Enlightened Activities

I shall purify oceans of realms;
 Liberate oceans of sentient beings;
 Understand oceans of Dharma;
 Realize oceans of wisdom;

Perfect oceans of actions;
 Fulfil oceans of aspirations;
 Serve oceans of buddhas!
 And perform these, without ever growing weary, through oceans of aeons!

15. Aspiration for Training

a) To Emulate the buddhas

All the buddhas throughout the whole of time,
 Attained enlightenment through Good Actions, and
 Their prayers and aspirations for enlightened action:
 May I fulfil them all completely!

b) To emulate the bodhisattvas: Samantabhadra

The eldest of the sons of all the buddhas
 Is called Samantabhadra: 'All-good':
 So that I may act with a skill like his,
 I dedicate fully all these merits!



To purify my body, my speech and my mind as well,
 To purify my actions, and all realms,
 May I be the equal of Samantabhadra
 In his skill in good dedication!

c) Mañjushri

In order to perform the full virtue of Good Actions,
 I shall act according to Mañjushri's prayers of aspiration,
 And without ever growing weary, in all the aeons to come,
 I shall perfectly fulfil every one of his aims!

16. Concluding Aspiration

Let my bodhisattva acts be beyond measure!
 Let my enlightened qualities be measureless too!
 Keeping to this immeasurable activity,
 May I accomplish all the miraculous powers of enlightenment!

Extent of the Aspiration

Sentient beings are as limitless
 As the boundless expanse of space;
 So shall my prayers of aspiration for them
 Be as limitless as their karma and harmful emotions!

The Benefits of Making Aspirations

1. The Benefits of Making Aspirations in General

Whoever hears this king of dedication prayers,
 And yearns for supreme enlightenment,
 Who even once arouses faith,
 Will gain true merit greater still

Than by offering the victorious buddhas
 Infinite pure realms in every directions, all ornamented with jewels,
 Or offering them all the highest joys of gods and humans
 For as many aeons as there are atoms in those realms.

2. The Thirteen Benefits in Detail

Whoever truly makes this Aspiration to Good Actions,
 Will be never again be born in lower realms;
 They will be free from harmful companions, and
 Soon behold the Buddha of Boundless Light.



They will acquire all kind of benefits, and live in happiness;
 Even in this present life all will go well,
 And before long,
 They will become just like Samantabhadra.

All negative acts—even the five of immediate retribution—
 Whatever they have committed in the grip of ignorance,
 Will soon be completely purified,
 If they recite this Aspiration to Good Actions.

They will possess perfect wisdom, beauty, and excellent signs,
 Be born in a good family, and with a radiant appearance.
 Demons and heretics will never harm them,
 And all three worlds will honour them with offerings.

They will quickly go beneath the bodhi-tree,
 And there, they will sit, to benefit all sentient beings, then
 Awaken into enlightenment, turn the wheel of Dharma,
 And tame Mara with all his hordes.

3. The Benefits in Brief

The full result of keeping, teaching, or reading
 This Prayer of Aspiration to Good Actions
 Is known to the buddhas alone:
 Have no doubt: supreme enlightenment will be yours!

Dedication of the Merits of this Meritorious Aspiration

1. Dedication that Follows the Bodhisattvas

Just as the warrior Mañjushri attained omniscience,
 And Samantabhadra too
 All these merits now I dedicate
 To train and follow in their footsteps,

2. Dedication that Follows the Buddhas

As all the victorious buddhas of past, present and future
 Praise dedication as supreme,
 So now I dedicate all these roots of virtue
 For all beings to perfect Good Actions.



3. *Dedication towards Actualizing the Result*

When it is time for me to die,
 Let all that obscures me fade away, so
 I look on Amitabha, there in person,
 And go at once to his pure land of Sukhavati.

In that pure land, may I actualize every single one
 Of all these aspirations!
 May I fulfil them, each and every one,
 And bring help to beings for as long as the universe remains!

4. *Dedication towards Receiving a Prophecy from the Buddhas*

Born there in a beautiful lotus flower,
 In that excellent and joyous buddha realm,
 May the Buddha Amitabha himself
 Grant me the prophecy foretelling my enlightenment!

5. *Dedication towards Serving Others*

Having received the prophecy there,
 With my billions of emanations,
 Sent out through the power of my mind,
 May I bring enormous benefit to sentient beings, in all the ten directions!

Conclusion

Through whatever small virtues I have gained
 By reciting this Aspiration to Good Actions,
 May the virtuous wishes of all beings' prayers and aspirations
 All be instantly accomplished!

Through the true and boundless merit
 Attained by dedicating this Aspiration to Good Actions,
 May all those now drowning in the ocean of suffering,
 Reach the supreme realm of Amitabha!

May this King of Aspirations bring about
 The supreme aim and benefit of all infinite sentient beings;
 May they perfect what is described in this holy prayer, uttered by Samantabhadra!
 May the lower realms be entirely emptied!

This completes the *King of Aspiration Prayers*, *Samantabhadra's 'Aspiration to Good Actions.'*

This provisional English version is based on the translations by: Tulku Thondup Rinpoche and Harold Talbott, Professor R.A.F. Thurman, and Elizabeth Callahan and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso.

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The Prayer of the Vajradhatu Mandala

Namo Guru. On the tenth day of the monkey month in the year of the monkey, Guru Rinpoche revealed the mandala of the Vajra Space in the Turquoise Face middle temple in Samye. At that time he said this prayer and from then on the King and subjects always practised it. Beings of the future should recite it one-pointedly.

To all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the ten directions and four times,
 And the assemblies of Lamas, Yidams, Dakinis and Dharma Protectors,
 Numerous as the atoms in the universe, we pray, Come!
 Be seated on lotus-and-moon thrones in the sky before us.
 We submit obeisance, devoted in body, speech and mind,
 And make the outer, inner, secret and absolute offerings.
 Before the Sugatas, the sublime support,
 We repent all our past negative actions
 And remorsefully confess our present non-virtuous deeds;
 We take the vow to turn away from all such actions in the future.
 We rejoice at all merit and positive actions.
 May the Buddhas, without passing into Nirvana,
 Turn the Dharma Wheel of the Three Pitakas and the Unsurpassable Vehicle.
 We dedicate all our merit to all beings;
 May they attain the level of consummate liberation.
 Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, think of us!
 With this excellent prayer that we have begun
 May we follow the example of the omniscient beings,
 The Buddha Samantabhadra and his spiritual sons,
 And the exalted Mañjushri.
 May the precious Teachers who sustain the Doctrine
 Embrace all like the sky,
 May they illuminate all like the sun and moon,
 May they stay forever like the mountains.
 May the precious Sangha, the foundation of the Doctrine,
 Possess the treasure of harmony, pure discipline and the three trainings.
 May practitioners of the secret mantrayana, the heart of the Teachings,
 Keep the samaya and perfect the stages of development and completion.
 May the Dharma-protector kings, patrons of the Doctrine,
 Expand their dominion and benefit the Teachings.
 May the royal ministers, servants of the Doctrine,
 Be skilful and grow in intelligence.
 May wealthy laymen who support the Teachings
 Be prosperous and free from danger.
 In all countries where there is faith in the Doctrine
 May happiness reign and difficulties be overcome.
 And may we practitioners who are practising the Path,
 Have no deterioration of samaya, may we accomplish our wishes.



May all with whom we are connected by karma, good or bad,
Be cared for by the Buddhas, temporarily and ultimately.
May all beings enter the door of the Unsurpassable Vehicle
And obtain the great kingdom of Samantabhadra!³²

The reincarnation of Prince Murub Tsenpo, the great tertön Chogyur Déchen Lingpa, took out this treasure in the middle of a large gathering of people from below the top of Trak Ri Rinchen Tsekpa, on the right side of the holy place Sengchen Namtrak. It had been written down in Tibetan characters by Yeshe Tsogyal on Vairotsana's silk robe. Immediately after its discovery the text was corrected by Pema Garwang Lodro Thaye. May virtue and excellence increase!

32 Chokchu Düshi by Chokgyur Lingpa, translation by the Padmakara Translation Group.



Prayer for the Future of the Dharma

*from the Moon Light Sutra*³³

To the buddhas: Vipashyin, Shikhin, Vishvabhukra,
 Krakuchanda, Kanakamuni, and Kashyapa,
 And Shakyamuni—Gautama, deity of all deities,
 To the seven warrior-like buddhas, we pay homage!

“In the past, to benefit beings,
 I bore all kinds of hardship, and
 Gave up my own happiness, through this
 May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

“In the past, for the sake of the sick,
 I gave my life away;
 So, to protect the needy and the poor,
 Long may the teachings remain ablaze!

“By my giving up sons, daughters, and wives,
 Riches and elephants and chariots,
 For the sake of the treasure of enlightenment,
 May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

“Through the offerings I made to the buddhas, pratyekabuddhas,
 Shravakas, male and female,
 And to the great sages,
 May the teachings blaze, long into the future!”

“Through the sufferings I endured
 For many millions of aeons,
 Seeking instruction for the sake of enlightenment,
 May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

“Through my conduct of discipline,
 And age-long asceticism,
 And my offerings to the buddhas of ten directions,
 May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

“Through my diligence in the past,
 Constantly stable, and overcoming others' disruption;
 So as to liberate all beings,
 May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

³³ Wyl. *zla ba sgron me'i mdo*



“Through my constant practice of patience,
While sentient beings’ negative emotions degenerated,
Bearing with patience all their harmful acts,
May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

“Through my concentration, complete liberation and formless absorption,
Samadhis as many as the grains of sand in the river Ganges—
Through the power of my meditation,
May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

“Through seeking wisdom in the past,
By practising austerities in the forest,
And teaching countless shastras to others,
May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

“Through giving, out of love, my flesh and blood,
Giving my life away entirely, and
Giving arms and legs and every part of my body,
May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

“In the past, with loving kindness, I caused
Harmful sentient beings to mature completely,
And I led them to the three vehicles; through this
May the teachings blaze, long into the future!

“In the past, with skilful means and wisdom,
I liberated sentient beings from perverse views,
And led them to the correct view; through this
May the Dharma increase in every way!

“With the four means of attracting disciples,
I released beings from the fire of the emotions,
And vanquished rampant negativity; through this
May my followers remain, long into the future!

“I freed tirthikas and others
From the rivers of different views,
And led them to the correct view; through this
May my followers always have devotion!
May the teachings blaze, long into the future!”³⁴

34 translated by Rigpa Translations.



This poem says it all.

During Chin, Sung, Liang, Chi and Tang Dynasty,
 In search of dharma, high monks left Chang-An*;
 Hundreds went but less than ten came back,
 How could the latter ones know the hardships the predecessors had gone through?
 The road is far, the sky is blue, the weather is cold and freezing,
 Obstacles of deserts and rivers cause one to exhaustion;
 If the future generation does not understand the intentions of the predecessors,
 They will tend to look at the Sutras easily and lightly.

**Chang-An was the capital of Tang Dynasty and some other dynasties. Literally means "Long-lasting peace".
 (a very rough translation by Kris Yao)*

Mantras for Offering Flowers and Prostrations

As you offer flowers at holy sites recite the following mantra:

NAMO BHAGAVATE PUSHPE KITU RAJAYA TATHAGATAYA ARHATE SAMYAK SAM
 BUDDHAYA TATYA THA OM PUSHPE PUSHPE MAHA PUSHPE SUPUSHPE UTTBHAVE
 PUSHPE AM BHAVE PUSHPE AHVA KARA NI SVAHA

Recite the mantra seven times and offer flowers. The mantra will increase the number of flowers and therefore the amount of merit you accumulate by 10 million.

As you offer prostrations during your pilgrimage recite the following mantra:

OM NAMO BHAGAVATE RATNA KITU RAJAYA TATHAGATAYA ARHATEY SAMYAK SAM
 BUDDHAYA TATYATHA OM RATNE RATNE MAHA RATNE RATNA VIJAYE SVAHA

If you recite this mantra while doing prostrations it will be as if you are offering prostrations at 10 million holy sites, increasing the amount of merit you accumulate by the same amount.



Afterword

by DJKN

This fragment of gibberish with a mighty name came about after I travelled to Buddha's holy places in India with some friends and found myself constantly being pestered by questions about what they should do and what they should think.

As you can see, this is definitely not a guidebook. If you're interested in guidebooks I can recommend Gendun Chopel's *A Guide to India* and Dharma Publishing's *Holy Places of the Buddha Crystal Mirror 9* by Elizabeth Cook. I am also always amazed by the amount of detailed information available in Lonely Planet's guides, which might come in handy for those who, like me, have the mind of a tourist.

I have only included a few prayers and refuge liturgies in this text and none have been written by Tibetans, so feel free to choose from the millions prayer liturgies available, from whichever tradition you happen to be following.

If this text is comprehensible and readable it is because of Janine Schulz's diligence and attention.

A great deal of effort was also made by a group of giggling Singaporeans under the direction of Huang Jing Rui: Ng Ching Ee, Karen Choo Lee Yee, Sonam Tenzing, Faustina Tsai, Collin Neo, Vincent Teo, Richard Sheng, Lily Chia, Karma Tendzin, Ben Tan, Tessa Goh, Esty Tan, Mary Sheldrake, Magnus Lee; Lane Fagan who coordinating transcribers; Frank Lee who helped with recordings; Chris Jay and Dave Zwieback who helped with the sound files; Chou Su-Ching, Hsu Yi-Yu, John Wu Ning Qiang and Pawo Choyning Dorji who helped with research.

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Every time I read a new draft of this text—and I've read all of them—there seem to be more mistakes and contradictions in it than in the last draft, so I'm rapidly coming to the conclusion that the best thing to do is shut up! I have two misgivings about this text. The first is that because I'm lazy the process has dragged on for far too long; and the second is that recently I've become impatient and rushed to finish it. As a result, you'll find a great many errors in these pages. But I must be frank and warn you not to waste your time trying to refute anything you read here. This life offers so many better ways of spending your time, for example lighting a candle as an offering to the Buddha.