

SHITRO PRACTICE FOR THE DEAD¹

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3.8.2019, Dawu

Question: *Could You please explain about “the Buddhas of three times and 10 directions”?*

Rinpoche: That means “all the Buddhas”. If you talk about time, there are three times: past, now and future. If you talk about directions, there are ten directions. So talking about the Buddha, there must be one of those three times and one of those ten directions. Basically, “all the Buddhas”, no Buddha is left behind.

So, of course there are specific and general. In general, we talk about all of the Buddha. Buddhas in one of the three times and in one of the 10 directions. Buddha is in the past, Buddha is in the present and Buddha is in the future. The Buddha of the past is Dipamkara. The Buddha of the present is Buddha Shakyamuni, and the future Buddha is Maitreya. So this is the specific understanding of “Buddhas of three times”.

Then, five Buddha families also represent five directions. Five directions: the one is in the center, then east, west, north, and south. These are five Buddha families so there is a little difference. When we talk about the five Buddha families then center is one direction. When we talk about 10 directions, then four directions East, West, South, North, and Southwest, Northwest etc. and above and below. So they make 10 directions.

¹ The title is created by the translator of the transcribed text for the convenience of the reader.

Question: *Could You please explain: “Unnumberable clouds of offering satisfying the five senses.” What are they?*

Rinpoche: Is that talking about form and sound, the five organs?

The real questions: what can we offer? Anything that is good and that is pure we can offer to the Buddha. For example, when we offer flowers to the Buddha then that is for Buddha’s eyes – vision. This is the form. Incense for the nose, then sound for the ears and other things. Is that related to the question? This is from long ngondro. Usually, it is said the “five desirables”, “five senses”. Then of course, forms, sound, smell, taste, and touchable that include everything. So all phenomena include one of those.

Especially in Sutrayana, when we say “forms” [that means] “something beautiful. “Smell” - something that is good smell. But when we talk about Varjayana, it is opposite to the Sutrayana because the view of Varjayana sees everything equally pure. Of course nothing is good or bad. In Varjayana probably you can use anything to offer. But in Sutrayana, there must be something beautiful, something pure, something good and something clean. Those are the differences between the two yanas.

Of course new people, beginners, should follow the traditional yana. Varjayana is really something opposite. It is exactly opposite or it is equal [view] of everything. That means it does not see things like: these are very good or those are very bad. So there is no separation between good or bad because all phenomena in their nature are pure. From that point of view, anything can be offered. If you have that kind of view, if you can develop that kind of view or understanding, then anything can be offered. But if you are not able to see everything are equally pure, then you think this is pure, that is not good. Only in that case you can offer something that you think is good. It is taught in the teachings that you should do this or do that, then I think to follow the instructions is good.

According to our mental power, our mental faculty. We should do anything according to our mental faculty. Sometimes [there is] something beyond our mental faculty, which is not acceptable for us. For example, sometimes in Mantrayana it is ok to offer a great [piece] of flesh, but when you think that is ugly, not ok, some grasping in your mind, then you should not do that. However, if you understand correctly, so it is ok.

Question: *What can we do when a member of our family passed away within one year and we want to help them to have a better life? Or a member of our family passed away long time but we think they are still around. What can we do to help them?*

Rinpoche: The one who can really help oneself is oneself.

A master who practices and does a lot of good actions is able to help oneself and is able to go through bardo smoothly. Because it does not matter you believe in religion or believe in cause and effect or not that state always exists. The four great sufferings are birth, aging, sickness, and death. Those four great sufferings always exist all the time. It means when you are dead, it does not matter if you are religious, non-religious person or non-Buddhist person, you still go to the intermediate stage - bardo. Therefore, if you are smart and you care about your next life, you must try to accomplish something or you must try to prepare something so that you may have a better life in the future. Then, you may have a smooth path in the bardo. If you don't prepare, you don't care, you will reach such terrible things, [lots of] difficulties and fear. Of course there is no questions about that.

When we talk about cause and effect, there is something like the situation in the bardo of death. This means something that we can't really understand and not very easy to understand, because there are something hidden, not very obvious things. Therefore, people don't believe such things exist but in fact they exist. There are no doubts, no questions. The reason for me to say this is because the great masters,

mahasiddhas, they have been through these things. They have experiences, they have seen directly in person. They know everything but we don't know. It does not mean it does not exist when we don't know. It exists because someone who are very reliable like the Buddha, Guru Rinpoche, all of these maha-siddhas [say so]. They understand very well, they have seen these things really exist. Therefore, they know: this time this happens, other time that happens.

Everything is based on real stories. Therefore, these are something that we must think of and we must believe in. They exist and they are big problems for any sentient being; not only human beings but any sentient beings. When they pass away they have to go through this stage. No way to be avoided, except that you are good Dharma practitioners. They don't need to go through these stages. Other than that everyone [else does], including those kings, powerful people like the King of Devas. Anyone who dies has to go through this stage, therefore we should consider this, we should believe in this.

How can we help ourselves and others? [There are] instructions how to handle these things, so we must follow the instructions. We must practice according to the instructions. Only that way one can help oneself. Is it easy to get the instructions how to handle the intermediate state? Not really. To be able to receive the teaching, one master must have foundation, the fundamental understanding, and preparation such as ngondro. You should have a good mental faculty to be able to receive this teaching.

You have to be able to prepare yourself because this instruction is called secret Tantra, secret teaching. Secret teaching is like the great nectar, one must be a clean container. You don't want to put the great nectar into the dirty container. Then you waste everything. Therefore, these kinds of instructions are very secret teaching, very important teaching and very profound teaching. Therefore, you should practice first. You should have renunciation. You have to be able to give up a lot of things in this

life. You are not able to practice such teaching when you have so much attachment in your mind. Therefore, you have to clean your mind, your heart, your body, your speech at least somehow before you receive this teaching. Only then you can understand and practice correctly.

To receive, understand and practice this teaching is the best way to help oneself. This is the best way. Secondly, we can help each other by practicing and dedicating the merits to other people. You can practice by yourself for your friends and for family's members when they pass away, or [when] they are still alive. We can dedicate the merits for anyone.

When people die, for person like me, a Tibetan Buddhist person, to be able to help them, the best thing is that the person who passes away is the follower [of the helping person], who believes in such things. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain it. Phowa – there is such instruction. Phowa is basically to explain the consciousness that is in the intermediate stage. To explain the consciousness do this and do that. Do not go there or go here. We explain to the consciousness how to handle and the consciousness [may] understand correctly or not correctly, because one can make big mistakes very easily in the intermediate stage.

A lot of things are very confusion and very scary, so consciousness is very fearful. The consciousness is the person who passed away. That person is very fearful and hopeless and needs a lot of help. Therefore, we try to help, to pray and to dedicate your good actions for them. Then, they can receive benefits from you. Especially, [if] the lama is a good practitioner, who has a lot of wisdom, a lot of good power, has good experiences, high view, realization. A lama with that kind of view can help the dead people in the intermediate stage. Otherwise, it is very difficult for a person in that stage to send messages [for help] to people even though they hear very clearly.

They see us very clearly but there is so much mental distraction, so much fear at that time. The person gets distracted very easily. Secondly, they don't have mind to be calm to listen to you. But if you are powerful enough, you can hold the consciousness there to instruct. But that only a person like the Buddha, the most powerful one, [can do]. But if you don't have a good [karmic] connection to that consciousness, even if there were the Buddha, He still has difficulties to really help. Therefore, I already said if the dead person is a Buddhist practitioner, if the dead person has good connection and faith in the one who is trying to help then it is much better.

How can we can help the family's members who have passed away? So, in Tibet we have a good tradition: when a person dies, the family tries to practice and to invite monks - five, seven or ten - to do the Shitro practice for 49 days. That is a very important tradition and it is still going on in Tibet; not everywhere in Tibet but many parts still [keep this tradition], especially in Golok. It is very good tradition, good way to remember and think about the dead person. The family members really care about the dead person very much. It needs a lot of expenses, too, because they have to offer to the monks and they have to buy many things. They have to spend a lot of expensive things that are related to these activities.

The reason to do the 49 days of Shitro is the Buddha said most dead people are reborn in 49 days. That's why to make sure before they are reborn, we do a lot of prayer so that the dead person be able to obtain a good birth. That's why people try to practice. Basically, the ones who do Shitro practicing are responsible for the dead person to have a smooth path and a good birth. To keep that wish they try to develop bodhicitta, and to follow the instructions and to send messages to the consciousness how to obtain a good birth, how to get reborn in Dewachen or how to liberate. All of these are possible in the intermediate stage because that person somehow really needs help from people. They don't have a physical body and they don't have a real life,

therefore they are hopeless and they really need a live, physical body so they are looking for that. So whoever instructs, they will listen. They try to listen at least and really want to listen. Therefore, in intermediate stage, anything is possible.

During the 49 days, you should try to do good actions so the dead person can receive some benefits from you. The most traditional way is to send offerings to the monastery to request the Shanga to practice for them. The Shanga probably has more experiences and more power to help them than other people, because we are not that powerful yet and not pure yet.

For example, in our monastery, there is Varjakilaya retreat center. A special group practices Shitro every day for one hour for dead people. I told Lotsawa in Vietnam [about this] because they asked me the same question here. I told them the simplest way is to send the offerings to the monastery. We do Shitro practice for the dead for 49 days or one year as you wish. Then, Lotsawa sent me many messages. Sometimes a person dies at 5.00 am in the morning. Anytime when I receive these messages I also send the messages to the center. I think something like this is very good. I believe this is very helpful. Then, this is not very costly. This is very simple offering so they can do [Shitro] practice 49 days or one year as you wish. Then, that is the simple way and easy to understand. Other stuffs are not very simple and easy. “Rinpoche said many things, but now how can I help them?” Just send to the temple: “Please help me to pray for the person who passed away.” I think this is the easiest way to help them.

Question: *When we do Yidam practice, do we need to do hand mudras?*

Rinpoche: Yeah, it is one part, small part in the practice. If you know to do that it is ok but you don’t know how to do it, it is also ok. But you know and you do, it is more complete. When we do annual retreat, usually we don’t do too much of this, we focus

on the visualization and recitation and dedication. These three parts are very important in any practice, especially so-called Lama, Yidam, Dakini - Three Roots.

Question: *Can you show us how to do tsog?*

Rinpoche: There're different sizes of Sadhana of Tsog practice. Sadhanas are sometimes big and complicated, many parts, many things, and many requirements. But people like in your situation probably just follow one very short version of prayer like written by Jigme Lingpa. Every older Dharma practitioners probably know [this text], especially from Nyingma tradition. Then just follow that [instruction] and prepare some food, some offerings and put them on the altar and then thinking.

You visualize your offerings become countless and then you invite all the Buddhas from in the three times and ten directions in front of you in space. You visualize that you are offering all of these food and these offerings become countless like clouds. Then offer to the Three Jewels whatever they desire for, any kind of food naturally, miraculously happen. You should think that way and you should believe that way. Because you're visualizing and you're reciting some those powerful mantras and because of that you can make [all] it that happen. That is very simple way but it's pretty good enough.

The end of talk