

The Meaning of Prostrations - by Lama Gendyn Rinpoche

Why do we do Prostrations?

1. The Purification of Pride

First of all, we should know why we do prostrations. We do not do them to endear ourselves to somebody else. We do not do them for the Buddha. Such concepts are completely wrong. The Buddha is not a god of this world. We bow down to purify all situations from the past where we did not respect others. Being interested in our own satisfaction and ourselves we did many negative actions.

Prostrations help us realize that there is something more meaningful than ourselves. In this way we purify the pride that we have accumulated through countless lifetimes thinking: "I am right," "I am better than others," or "I am the most important one." During countless lifetimes we have developed pride that is the cause of our actions and have accumulated the karma that is a source of our suffering and problems. The goal of prostrations is to purify this karma and to change our mind set. Prostrations help us rely on something more meaningful than our pride and ego clinging. In this way, through full confidence and devotion, we get rid of everything we have gathered because of pride.

2. The Purification of Body, Speech, and Mind

When we do prostrations we act on the level of body, speech, and mind. The result of doing them is a very powerful and thorough purification. This practice dissolves all impurities, regardless of their kind, because they were all accumulated through our body, speech, and mind. Prostrations purify on all three levels. Through the physical aspect of prostrating we purify our body. We offer our body to the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) and to all sentient beings, wishing that all their wishes are fulfilled. Through the repetition of the refuge mantra and the meaning we ascribe to it, we purify our speech. Through confidence in the Three Jewels we develop enlightened attitude and devotion. As we are aware of the perfect qualities of the refuge and offer everything to it, the veils in our minds dissolve. When our body, speech, and mind are being purified we realize that what we initially thought of as our body is actually a manifestation of enlightenment as active compassion. What we initially thought of as our speech is the expression of enlightenment on the level of joy; our mind is the truth level of enlightenment. We are able to see the enlightened reality of our body, speech, and mind - their full of wisdom truth that we initially were not aware of. We realize that this practice can lead us to our goal, enlightenment, because the three levels expressing the state of a Buddha appear immediately after the three levels of our existence - body, speech, and mind - are purified. We do not have to look for enlightenment anywhere else. We do not have to chase any perfect realizations. The three levels of enlightenment are true inherent qualities of our own body, speech, and mind. We did not see it before. Prostrations help us discover it.

3. Physical Benefits of Prostrations

Prostrations strongly influence the balance and harmony in our body. Blocks in its energy channels gradually dissolve. This helps us avoid diseases, lack of energy, and other

problems. Our mind becomes clearer. Our ability to understand increases.

The State of Mind During Prostrations

We should do prostrations with full confidence, joy and motivation to benefit others.

1. Confidence

We should have confidence in the perfect qualities of the Three Jewels and be sure that their blessing can remove the veils from our minds. The blessing can appear and the purification is effective when our confidence in body, speech, and mind meets the transforming qualities of the enlightened body, enlightened speech and enlightened mind - the sources of the refuge. If we do not have confidence and cannot open up to the Three Jewels prostrations will only be like a play.

2. Motivation to Benefit Others

When we do prostrations we should understand that good actions are the source of happiness of all sentient beings. Prostrations are a good example of this fact. When we do the practice using our body, speech, and mind, we offer our energy to others wishing that it brings them happiness. We should be happy about this fact and do prostrations with joy.

The Proper Practice

1. Visualization of the Refuge Tree In front of us in space we imagine the whole refuge tree. First, we imagine Dorje Chang - the lama who represents all sources of the refuge. We imagine the lama as the center of the refuge tree. We should be fully aware that Dorje Chang is our teacher and that he is the mind of our lama. We think about Dorje Chang to make sure that the manifestation of the nature of mind is not stained by our habitual thoughts. To help us keep the pure view, the view of wisdom, we imagine this perfectly pure form. At the same time we keep awareness that Dorje Chang is the mind of our lama. Everything that appears in front of us in space is like a rainbow or a reflection in a mirror; it is not a thing. If we have difficulties visualizing the whole refuge tree we should have confidence that all objects of the refuge are really in front of us even if we cannot hold them in our mind.

2. Awareness of Ourselves and Others

We are not alone in our practice. We are surrounded by all beings that fill the whole universe. We imagine our father on our right side and our mother on our left. When we stand between our parents from this life we realize that each and every being without exception has been our parent in some previous life. This helps us remember the goodness of all our parents, all sentient beings, who were helping us during countless lifetimes.

We imagine the ones we consider our enemies in front of us, between the refuge tree and ourselves. We think of the people who cause us problems and obstruct the realization of our plans. All these people are very important because they help us develop such qualities

as patience and compassion. We usually want to avoid such people. We try to stay away from them. We do not want to think about them. Putting them in front of us helps us not to forget them. Treating enemies in such a way protects us against disrespecting them.

We focus our attention on the refuge tree. We are confident that the refuge can free all sentient beings from the suffering of samsara and it can protect us against the anxiety that this suffering causes. In such a mind-set, surrounded by all sentient beings, we start to repeat the refuge mantra. Everything around us starts to vibrate. We experience strong light from the refuge tree. The light shines on us because of our own devotion. This makes us open up even more. Then we start to bow down. We are the masters of the ceremony and lead the whole practice. Our prostrations immediately inspire all beings to begin doing the same practice. We hear all beings repeating mantras and doing prostrations. These vibrations fill the whole universe.

Holding such a vision rather than concentrating only on ourselves widens our activity. On the one hand it gives us strength, on the other hand it gives us motivation to practice. All beings doing prostrations with us give us encouragement. Experiencing great amounts of energy from all beings doing prostrations, we feel even more confidence in and devotion to the Three Jewels. The feeling of "riding with the crowd" helps us finish prostrations quickly and experience great happiness during the practice.

3. The Symbolic Meaning of Each Element in the Act of Bowing Down

To give the ultimate dimension to our practice we should be aware of the symbolic meaning of a prostration. Touching our forehead with clasped hands, we ask the objects of the refuge for the blessing of their bodies. At the same time we imagine that the blessing of their enlightened bodies radiates on us, goes through our body and dissolves all its obscurations. Then our clasped hands touch our throat. We ask for the blessing of speech. At the same time we think that the blessing of their enlightened speech emanates from the objects of the refuge and purifies all obscurations that we have accumulated through our speech. In such a way we free ourselves from these obscurations. When we touch our heart with clasped hands we ask the refuge for the blessing of their enlightened mind. It helps us get rid of all veils and wrong views in our minds. We are confident that all evil wishes we have been filling our minds with since beginningless time are completely purified. We should think that we are getting the full blessing of enlightened body, speech, and mind from the Three Jewels. Through the power of this blessing, all veils, bad karma, and negative tendencies in our body, speech, and mind are purified. We are completely pure and inseparable from the body, speech, and mind of the lama and the Three Jewels.

When our body touches the ground with its five points (knees, hands, forehead) we should realize that five disturbing emotions - anger, attachment, ignorance, pride, and jealousy - leave our body and disappear in the earth. In such a way we experience complete purification.

The two aspects of prostrations, dissolving the mind's poisons and getting the blessing from the Three Jewels, cause the transformation of pride, attachment, jealousy, anger,

and ignorance into the five corresponding wisdoms. We should be confident that the transformation is actually taking place, that we have the natural, inherent ability to develop these wisdoms.

This symbolic aspect of prostrations will work only if we have confidence. Our confidence can give us this big purification. Practicing without confidence is just like aerobic exercise.

4. The Significance of Devotion

Our devotion will grow the more prostrations we do. Finally, we will reach the level where we will no longer think that our body, speech, and mind are any different from the body, speech, and mind of the Three Jewels. Prostrations give a wonderful result; they are the source of a very powerful blessing and a great purification. We should not think that prostrations consist only of an activity of our body. The blessing and purification appear mainly because of our devotion.

5. Increasing the Strength of Our Practice

We practice with an open mind. We should not think that we are the only person doing prostrations. All beings are doing them with us. We do not have to limit our thinking only to ourselves. We should not assert ourselves by thinking, "I am bowing down." If we think like that we accumulate good potential that corresponds to the act of doing one prostration. If we think of all sentient beings doing prostrations with us, the good potential we accumulate is much bigger. When we are doing prostrations we should think that a hundred of our emanations are doing them with us. If we are able to imagine that our practice will be much stronger. We should not count more prostrations if we imagine more beings doing them with us. This is only one of the special Vajrayana methods that help us strengthen our practice.

6. Linking the Prostrations with Calming the Mind

After a while our body will be tired. This is a useful moment to practice calming the mind. When the body and mind are tired, attachment decreases. If we stop doing prostrations for a moment our mind will naturally calm down by itself without any additional help on our side. When after a while our body and mind feel rested again, our mind becomes agitated. This is the sign to start prostrations again. When we alternate doing prostrations with calming the mind we can practice ceaselessly.

[The Approach to Suffering](#)

Sometimes we might experience difficulties doing prostrations. Pain and fatigue will be in our way. There is always some concern: pain in our knees, elbows, lower back, everywhere. There is no reason to be discouraged by it or lose confidence in our practice. Neither should we strengthen the feeling by saying to ourselves, "I suffer so much, I feel so weak." By doing this we completely block ourselves. We lose the ability to act. When the pain is allowed to "have a say," it can become a real obstacle on the path of our further practice. We should use every unpleasant experience, whether physical or mental, as a means to get enlightened. Such experiences should mobilize us toward greater effort

on our path.

Everything we experience depends on the state of mind we are in. If we want to experience things differently we must change the state of our mind. If we manage to efficiently transform suffering into a positive and beneficial experience, the suffering will disappear completely without a trace. This will give us more happiness and joy.

Prostrations are a way of accumulating truly good potential. They are an easy and effective way to purify negative actions from our past. On the other hand, if - due to pain and fatigue - we continue prostrations being depressed, true purification does not take place.

The Techniques of Working with Unpleasant Experiences

1. Depletion of Karma

We should not think of suffering as something very serious. We should remember that suffering is just karma, that it is impermanent like everything else. Suffering has its end. When our karma ripens we should remain relaxed and observe this natural flow of things. If we manage to infuse our practice with the understanding of the impermanence of karma, it will dissolve by itself. Karma is not something we have to accept or reject. It is like the obligation to pay our bills which appears automatically. When we have paid our debts karma dissolves by itself and there is nothing to reject.

2. Purification of Karma through Physical Indisposition

Dharma practice eliminates veils and stains that are results of our former actions. We should perceive the physical indisposition that we experience during the practice as the result of the compassion of the Three Jewels. This relatively small suffering dissolves future karma which will not ripen. For this reason we should experience this suffering with joy and confidence. Such unpleasant experiences indicate that the practice works. The use of purifying methods may result in many unpleasant experiences on the level of body, speech, and mind. At the same time, we are getting rid of difficulties and veils in our minds. As we experience purification as a result of our practice, our confidence in the Three Jewels increases. We feel deep gratitude because these relatively small nuisances help free us from conditions that would otherwise ripen as much greater suffering.

3. Noticing Ego-Clinging through Suffering

We should regard every suffering as an antidote to ego clinging. Experiencing one's own suffering is in itself a proof of our egocentric attitude towards all phenomena. At the same time, such situations (where we experience suffering) give us the possibility to get rid of our ego clinging. If we have no ego-illusion we can experience no suffering. We should also understand the cause of our suffering: we experience it because of our former actions which resulted from our ego clinging. Being so focused on ourselves, we have sown many karmic seeds which have now ripened as suffering. We can treat suffering as a teaching showing us the results of actions that result from being focused on oneself. From beginningless time this ego clinging has been the cause of us being caught in the cycle of existence (samsara).

4.Observing Our Ego

Ego wants to be satisfied all the time. As long as everything is all right our ego is content and tries to keep this state. Our "self" clings to this contentment and our mind is distressed with desire - the poison of attachment. When nice circumstances are gone, ego still clings to them because it wants to be content. More attachment and desire appear in our mind. In the cases of unpleasant situations the ego reacts with anger and hatred. It tries to avoid them and replace them with pleasant experiences. In this way our mind is anxious and unhappy. We can recognize the continuous influence of ego in every situation. It ceaselessly categorizes experiences as pleasant or unpleasant. If we follow our ego we accumulate karma which will sooner or later ripen as different kinds of suffering.

5.Unpleasant Experiences as a Test of Our Perseverance

We should remember about our promise to use our body, speech, and mind for the benefit of others. Knowing that we work for the benefit of all beings we should keep our promise, subdue our internal difficulties, and continue our practice.