

The Form of Compassion

Sherab Gyaltzen Rinpoche offers an introductory Tantric visualization practice of the deity Chenrezi, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Translated from Tibetan and adapted by Pamela Gayle White.

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It is said that the Enlightened Ones possessed of the omniscient eye of wisdom can state with certainty exactly how many drops of water have fallen during an uninterrupted twelve year rainfall but that they cannot calculate the benefit that comes from a single sincere, perfectly focused, and pure recitation of the six-syllable mantra of Chenrezi, the Bodhisattva of Compassion: Om mani padme hung.

I believe that anyone who is inspired by the practice of Chenrezi (Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit), the deity who embodies compassion, can begin to do his meditation. While the importance of compassion is common to all Buddhists, the Mahayana tradition accentuates actively benefiting others. Our ability to do this depends on the strength of our Bodhicitta, the awakened mind that is fully focused on attaining enlightenment and helping others.

To develop an awakened mind, we need to develop compassion. And to develop compassion, we need to develop basic kindheartedness. Kindheartedness is an essential human quality that should be cultivated by everyone, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. It should always be present, whether we are engaging in everyday activity or formal practice. Every Mahayana practice exemplifies various aspects of Bodhicitta—there are no exceptions—but I am convinced that there is no greater practice than Chenrezi for developing kindheartedness and compassion. Moreover, no deity meditation is superior to Chenrezi when it comes to ensuring temporary, relative happiness here and now, and for laying the groundwork for ultimate happiness in the future. This is why I think that it is very beneficial for all who are inspired by this practice to have access to it.

In principle, if we do deity practice according to Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism, we first need to have formally taken refuge in the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—as a confirmation of our commitment to the Buddhist path. Then we can request the empowerment, reading transmission, and instructions connected with a given deity meditation. Once we have received them, their combined presence gives the practice its full potential, as the door to blessing is wide open. In the case of Chenrezi, however, if we are truly inspired by and have confidence in the deity and his mantra, Om Mani padme hung, his meditation-recitation will undoubtedly be beneficial even without these prerequisites.

Of course, those who find they are interested in pursuing and deepening their practice should seek instructions from a qualified teacher. In Tantric Buddhism, deity meditation is a method that allows the mind's inherent goodness to manifest, to increase constantly, and to never decline. The goal of all deity practices is to develop qualities in the practitioner that mirror those represented by the deity. Clearly, loving-kindness and compassion—the qualities associated with Chenrezi—are present in our own hearts, our own minds. All the same, when we are motivated to develop them further, it is helpful to have a method.

Although he is the basis for our practice, Chenrezi's form is in fact emptiness; ultimately it has no more reality than anything else, including our own forms, our own bodies. Because a body, thing, or self is a composite that can always be broken down into smaller bits, none of them can be said to exist substantially in its own right. In fact, the "self" or "thing" that is the basis for experience has no tangible reality whatsoever—it's just a mass of infinitesimal particles, an amalgam of aggregates. Until we have experienced this truth, until we have realized the absolute, empty nature of reality, we continue to perceive our universe in terms of ultimately fictitious dichotomies such as self/other, mine/yours, good/bad, worldly beings/enlightened Buddhas, and so forth. Our perception is rooted in confusion, but we can make use of these illusory distinctions when we direct our aspirations and prayers to those who can convey blessing, the Buddhas.

As ordinary human beings, we sit down with our ordinary bodies and mental patterns and begin to meditate on the extraordinary, ageless form of Chenrezi: dazzling white, one face, four arms, two hands holding a wish-fulfilling jewel at the level of his heart, the others holding a crystal rosary and a white lotus by the stem, and so on. By supplicating him, we develop qualities of devotion and trust. By doing his meditation recitation, we develop both loving-kindness and compassion toward beings, along with nonreferential loving-kindness and compassion. By training in exchanging our ordinary vision of our environment and all who inhabit it for a vision based on enlightenment, we develop our ability to realize the truth. On a relative level, of course, the practitioner visualizing Chenrezi is me; the specific objects of my loving-kindness and compassion are all beings; and my practice consists of imagining them being freed from suffering and established in happiness. On an absolute level, I, the practitioner, am not "real"; the beings that are the object of my compassion are not "real"; and my Vajrayana practice method is not "real." It is when this realization arises and our practice becomes absolutely free of any focus or reference point that ultimate loving-kindness and compassion have truly dawned. Ultimately, there is no one to pray to, no prayer to express, no blessing to receive. Ultimately, there is absolutely no difference between Chenrezi and the enlightened quality of our own mind.

The practice: Three phases of Chenrezi

While there are a great many different forms of the deity and his practice, the form given here is rooted in a short daily practice text called *Extending throughout Space for the Benefit of Beings*, composed by the fifteenth-century dharma king Tangtong Gyalpo. All schools of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet and beyond practice this meditation recitation, and it is certain to convey blessing. The further meditation instructions provided are based on *A Continual Rain for the Benefit of Beings*, a commentary on Tangtong Gyalpo's text written by the Fifteenth Karmapa, Khakhyab Dorje (1871–1922).

Taking refuge and developing Bodhicitta

Whether we do Chenrezi or any other form of practice, we always begin by recalling our objectives. As practitioners, what should our goal be? Buddhists will aim for perfect awakening in order to be of maximum benefit to others. Those who are not committed to Buddhism, but who are interested in the practice, should also be clear that their motivation for practicing Chenrezi is to be able to help all beings become liberated from suffering and find happiness. This is what we mean by “loving kindness and compassion.” Loving-kindness is defined as the fervent desire to establish all beings, without exception and without distinction, in happiness and joy. Compassion is the yearning to do everything possible to save all beings from whatever suffering they may encounter as a result of the negative karma they have accumulated. We also wish to be able to prevent all beings from perpetuating the causes of such suffering: negative actions based on confusion and ignorance. With the goal in mind of benefiting others and ourselves, we begin the practice by taking refuge and developing Bodhicitta. We imagine that in the sky in front of us, seated on a lotus and moon amid a cloud of rainbows, is noble Chenrezi, just as depicted in paintings or statues. We ourselves are the principal figure, surrounded by a great gathering of all beings, including our enemies, loved ones, and all those in between. We develop awareness that Chenrezi embodies the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The awakened mind of Chenrezi is Buddha, the Enlightened One. His speech is the Dharma, the teachings of the path, as expressed by the Om Mani padme hung mantra garland. His fully ornamented body is the Sangha, the noble assembly of realized practitioners. Understanding that Chenrezi is the one who can protect us all from the great ocean of suffering, we recite the first two lines of refuge shown below. Then, with the aspiration to continue to practice until the suffering of all beings has been completely alleviated, we affirm our commitment to awakened mind by reciting the next two lines expressing Bodhicitta. These four lines should be recited three times or more: Until I have reached full awakening, I take refuge In the Buddha, the Dharma, and the supreme Assembly. Through the merit resulting from this meditation practice, May I attain enlightenment in order to benefit beings. As innumerable light rays shine forth from Chenrezi’s body and touch all the beings we have visualized, their negativities, veils, and pain are purified and they all experience great joy. The field of refuge then melts into light and dissolves into us. In this way, our mind stream has been blessed.

Deity meditation and mantra recitation

We begin by transforming our ordinary vision, thinking that our everyday environment appears as a pure and excellent Buddha-realm, the blissful realm of Buddha Amitabha called Dewachen (Sukhavati in Sanskrit). Those unfamiliar with the idea of pure realms can simply imagine a beautiful, blissful place where every last being is perfectly contented, where terms such as pain, suffering, and misery are unheard of, and where the minds of all who abide there are wholly infused with goodness. We envision ourselves seated in the center of this Buddha-realm, with our father of this life sitting to our right, and our mother of this life to our left. In front of us are all those who might be inclined to harm us. We imagine that this inner group is surrounded by an incalculable number of sentient beings of every kind, as if we had all come together in an enormous marketplace. Above our heads and the head of each being, there appears an eight-petaled white lotus with stamens in a halo of rainbow-like light. Upon each lotus lies a flat white moon disk, and on this stands the white letter Hri, Chenrezi’s seed syllable, which symbolizes the essence of his mind stream. Light rays emanate from the Hri and travel to Buddha fields of all directions, making offerings to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas who abide there. The light rays then return from these Buddha-

fields laden with the blessing of the Buddhas' and bodhisattvas' enlightened bodies, speech, and minds, and melt back into the seed syllable Hri. Once again, light rays leave the Hri and touch all sentient beings of all realms, relieving them of physical and mental suffering, purifying the obscurations of their bodies, speech, and minds, and establishing them in the blissful, awakened state of Chenrezi himself. The light rays return again to the Hri and dissolve into it. With this, the Hri instantaneously transforms into the deity Chenrezi. When we visualize him, we are aware that he is not solid or substantial, yet he appears with the clarity of a rainbow in the sky, or of the moon's reflection in water. We should picture him with precision and in detail, being careful not to imagine a tangible, physical form. With the conviction that he is the very essence of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha brought together, we recite: Upon the white lotus and moon above the heads Of myself and all sentient beings throughout space Is HRI, from which noble, supreme Chenrezi appears, Gleaming white and radiating five-colored light. Lovely and smiling, he gazes with eyes of compassion. The first two of his four hands are held in prayer, the lower two hold a crystal rosary and white lotus. Adorned with silk and jewel ornaments, His upper body is clothed with a deerskin. He is crowned by Buddha Amitabha, and seated in the adamantine posture, with an immaculate full moon as his backrest. In essence he is the union of all sources of refuge. Taking our time, we read and visualize distinctly each aspect of his body. Then, in unison with all the beings that we have envisioned around us, we address noble and supreme Chenrezi. Our minds perfectly focused, we think, "You know what must be done. With full trust we surrender ourselves to your wisdom. Kindly deliver us from the conditioned realms rife with suffering, and guide us to the omniscience of enlightenment."

Then we recite the following verse at least three times: Lord of pure white, undefiled and flawless, your head is crowned with the perfect Buddha. You behold beings with the eyes of compassion: Chenrezi, I bow down before you. Then, innumerable light rays, predominantly white, and also blue, green, yellow, and red, emanate from the body of the Noble One above our heads. The instant they touch us, it is like the light of a torch that illuminates and dispels the darkness. All of the veils and obscurations that exist due to negative karma accumulated through the misuse of body, speech, and mind are eradicated. Then the deluded, dualistic karmic tendency that has fostered clinging to self and other as subject and object since beginningless time is purified, and the blessing that creatively manifests as inseparability from the body, speech, and mind of Lord Chenrezi is granted. We imagine that the outer environment has become the pure realm of Dewachen, and all beings that inhabit it have effectively become Chenrezi, the embodiment of compassion. All sounds, including the sounds of living beings—speech, animal sounds, and so on—as well as those of the elements and inanimate objects, are perceived as the sound of the mantra Om mani padme hung. All thoughts that arise in our minds—good thoughts, bad thoughts, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—are perceived as being inseparable from the awareness-emptiness that is the perfectly pure mind of Chenrezi. This is the main visualization of the Chenrezi practice. All of the more extensive visualizations belonging to the different versions of the Chenrezi meditation are condensed and included in this one. We recite: Having prayed one-pointedly in this way, Light emanates from the body of the Noble One, Purifying misperception and impure karmic experience. The outer universe manifests as Dewachen, And the body, speech, and mind of the beings who live there Are the enlightened body, speech, and mind of Lord Chenrezi. Appearance, sound, and awareness are inseparable from emptiness. This is then followed by the repeated recitation of the mantra Om Mani padme hung. Whether we are reciting a hundred mantras, two hundred, or thousands, we can alternate prayers to receive the blessing of Chenrezi with the visualization of light rays purifying all negativities

of body, speech, and mind, and all manifestations of dualistic clinging; and with the awareness of our environment as a pure realm, of all those who people it as Chenrezi, of our speech as the mantra, and of our thoughts as the mind of the deity. When we have finished our session of mantra recitation, the universe and its inhabitants dissolve into light. This light dissolves into Chenrezi, who himself melts into light. This light dissolves into us, and we imagine that there is no distinction between the deity and ourselves. Then we also melt into light and settle in nonconceptual meditation for as long as we can—at least few instants. When we emerge from this state, on the cushion and in daily life we strive to maintain our awareness of the pure dimension of our environment and those who share it with us, as expressed by the following lines: Our physical forms manifest as the body of the Noble One, All sounds are the melody of the six syllables, And thoughts are the vast expanse of great wisdom.

Dedicating merit

Finally, we dedicate the merit, the positive spiritual energy garnered through our practice, thinking, “Through this merit, may we rapidly attain a state equal to that of Chenrezi. May our merit contribute to establishing all beings, as numerous as the sky is vast, in everlasting peace and well-being: the ultimate happiness that is full awakening.” With this, we recite: Through this virtue may I swiftly attain the state of Lord Chenrezi, and may I establish all beings, without a single exception, in this state. This, in a nutshell, is the practice of Chenrezi. If the visualizations prove to be too daunting, we can simply imagine Chenrezi above our heads and facing in the same direction, or facing us in the sky, or seated at the level of our own hearts. As we recite the mantra, we supplicate him mentally, thinking, “Chenrezi, please heed me!” as we look to him for refuge in this and the following lives. Alternatively, it is also quite beneficial to recite the mantra as we develop the awareness that our impure universe, the confused beings who inhabit it, the sounds produced by beings and elements, and the diverse non-enlightened thoughts produced by these beings are all transformed into the enlightened aspects of the deity of compassion as described. And most simply, we can recite the mantra of compassion, Om Mani padme hung, while cultivating kindheartedness