

How to do prostration

By Sakya Pandita

NAMO MANJUSHRIYE

NAMO SUSHIRIYE

NAMA UTAMA SHIRIYE SVAHA

NAMO GURU BHYE NAMO BUDDHA YA

NAMO DHARMA YA

NAMO SANGHA YA

By offering prostrations toward the exalted Three Jewels, may I and all sentient beings be purified of our negativities and obscurations.

Folding the two hands evenly, may we attain the integration of method and wisdom.

Placing folded hands on the crown, may we be born in the exalted pure realm of Sukhavati. Placing folded hands at the forehead, may we purify all negative deeds and obscurations of the body.

Placing folded hands at the throat, may we purify all negative deeds and obscurations of the voice.

Placing folded hands at the heart, may we purify all negative deeds and obscurations of the mind. Separating the folded hands, may we be able to perform the benefit of beings through the two rupakaya.

Touching the two knees to the floor, may we gradually travel the five paths and ten stages. Placing the forehead upon the ground, may we attain the eleventh stage of perpetual radiance. Bending and stretching the four limbs, may we spontaneously accomplish the four holy activities of peace, increase, magnetizing, and subjugation of negative forces.

Bending and stretching all veins and channels, may we untie the vein knots.

Straightening and stretching the backbone and central channel, may we be able to insert all airs without exception into the central channel.

Rising from the floor, may we be able to attain liberation by not abiding in samsara.

Repeatedly offering this prostration many times, may we be able to rescue sentient beings by not abiding in peace.

By the merit of the virtue of offering this prostration, in this life may we attain magnificent health and longevity, and after death may we be born in Sukhavati, and from there swiftly achieve perfect and full enlightenment, Buddhahood.

May all beings possess happiness.

May all lower births be forever empty.

May all bodhisattvas dwelling anywhere be able to accomplish all of their aspirations.

SARVA MANGALAM

Written by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltzen

An Explanation of How to Do Prostrations by Sakya Pandita

By Venerable Khenpo Kalsang Gyaltzen

First, it is always important to have right motivation. One should think, “For the sake of all sentient beings I want to achieve the highest attainment, Buddhahood. For that purpose I am studying this Dharma teaching and I will put it into practice to the best of my ability.” Such motivation is an important preliminary for receiving Dharma teachings.

Today we will study the text How to Do Prostrations by Sakya Pandita. We will learn how to offer prostrations toward those that are the excellent worthy object of prostrations, such as the Guru, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and tutelary deities.

Generally, prostrations are a very important part of Dharma practice, and also the best method of purifying the negative karma that we have accumulated in the past through our body, voice, and mind. Therefore, prostrations are included at the beginning of every practice, such as the Seven-Fold Prayer.

When doing prostrations, it is important to know and think mindfully about what we are doing with our body, voice, and mind for every prostration. This text by Sakya Pandita explains what aspirations to make, and what to say and think at each point in the prostration.

Sakya Pandita begins with mantras in Sanskrit. Recitation of these mantras transforms our prostrations by multiplying them a thousand times.

NAMO MANJUSHRIYE This means prostration to Manjushri.

NAMO SUSHIRIYE

NAMA UTAMA SHIRIYE SVAHA

These are the three mantras that transform the prostrations.

Also in addition:

NAMO GURU BHYE

NAMO BUDDHA YA

NAMO DHARMA YA

NAMO SANGHA YA

“By offering prostrations toward the exalted Three Jewels, may I and all sentient beings be purified of our negativities and obscurations.” This is our aspiration. Negativities may have been performed by body, voice, or mind. Obscurations are of two types: obscurations of defilements and obscurations of cognition.

“Folding the two hands evenly...”

There are a number of ways to fold the hands in the gesture of respect. Folding the hands so that the palms are flattened together is not a Buddhist gesture. The Buddhist gesture of respect is to fold the thumbs slightly and hold them between slightly cupped hands. The hands are held vertically at the heart, not under the chin.

Very Venerable Dezhung Rinpoche used to demonstrate this quite carefully. Flattening the palms together is not very respectful, and placing the tips of the fingers at the mouth is a gesture of sorrow. The hands should be placed in front of the heart.

“May we attain the integration of method and wisdom.”

Symbolically, this is the meaning of folding the two hands evenly. Method means merit. We pray to attain the integration of the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom.

“Placing folded hands on the crown, may we be born in the exalted pure realm of Sukhavati.”

Sukhavati is Amitabha’s realm. Folding our hands together evenly and placing them on our heads means,

“May we attain the integration of merit and wisdom and then be born in the pure realm of Sukhavati.”

“Placing folded hands at the forehead, may we purify all negative deeds and obscurations of the body.”

May all the negativities of the body, such as killing and stealing, etc. that I and all sentient beings have been accumulated be purified.

“Placing folded hands at the throat, may we purify all negative deeds and obscurations of the voice.”

May we purify all negativities of the voice, such as lying, harsh words, etc.

“Placing folded hands at the heart, may we purify all negative deeds and obscurations of the mind.”

Negative deeds of the mind are harmful thoughts, greed, etc.

Thus far, Sakya Pandita has explained the purpose or reason for doing prostrations; the reason we place our folded hands at the crown, forehead, throat, and heart is mainly to purify any negative deeds that have been accumulated through body, voice, and mind.

You may wonder about the symbolism of touching the forehead for the body, the throat for the voice, and the heart for the mind. The forehead is the center of the head, which is the principal part of the body because all the sensory organs are located above the neck, and the forehead is the center of all of them. The throat is the source of the voice. The heart symbolizes the mind. Although the mind has no physical substance, the mind goes with the blood and air inside the veins. The heart is the center of the veins and the source of the blood and air.

“Separating the folded hands, may we be able to perform the benefit of beings through the two rupakaya.”

The two rupakaya are the sambhogakaya, which is the excellent enjoyment body, and the nirmanakaya, which is the emanation body. Through these two, may we perform the benefit of sentient beings until the end of samsara.

“Touching the two knees to the floor, may we gradually travel the five paths and ten stages.”

The five paths are the path of accumulation, the path of application, the path of seeing, the path of meditation, and the path of accomplishment. The ten stages are those of the bodhisattva path. We aspire to be able to gradually travel all of these.

“Placing the forehead upon the ground, may we attain the eleventh stage of perpetual radiance.”

The ten stages are the bodhisattva’s stages. The eleventh, from the Paramitayana point of view, is Buddhahood.

“Bending and stretching the four limbs, may we spontaneously accomplish the four holy activities.”

The four limbs are the two arms and two legs. The four holy activities are the Buddhas’ activities of peace, increase, magnetizing, and subjugation of negative forces.

“Bending and stretching all veins and channels, may we untie the vein knots.”

Ordinary people’s veins are not completely straight, but have blockages. But after reaching higher stages such as the bodhisattva levels and Buddhahood, the vein knots are all gradually untied and the elements move easily with them.

“Straightening and stretching the backbone and central channel, may we be able to insert all airs without exception into the central channel.”

“Rising from the floor, may we be able to attain liberation by not abiding in samsara.”

“Repeatedly offering this prostration many times, may we be able to rescue sentient beings by not abiding in peace.”

This means we aspire not to abide in peaceful nirvana, but to rescue beings from samsara.

“By the merit of the virtue of offering this prostration, in this life may we attain magnificent health and longevity, and after death may we be born in Suktavati, and from there swiftly achieve perfect and full enlightenment, Buddhahood.”

“May all beings possess happiness.”

“May all lower births be forever empty.”

“May all bodhisattvas dwelling anywhere be able to accomplish all of their aspirations.”

“SARVA MANGALAM – Written by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen”

This completes the text written by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen. It explains how to do prostrations, and at the same time, what to recite and visualize.

Generally speaking, whenever we practice, we are supposed to integrate body, voice, and mind. When we do prostrations, we also integrate our physical movements in the gestures of respectful prostration, vocal recitation of these verses, and mental imagining of each of these visualizations at these specific times, so that the body, voice, and mind are integrated as a meditation.

Another important point is that when doing prostrations, we should think that we are prostrating with not just one body, but that our body emanates as many bodies as atoms in the entire universe. And we should think that we are doing prostrations to infinite numbers of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, praising their perfections and good qualities in infinite ways. Thinking this, the merit of a single prostration multiplies many trillion times. Otherwise, thinking merely, “I’m doing one prostration,” of course is beneficial, but imagining our body, voice, and mind as manifold is much more powerful.

Another important point is to think, “I’m doing these prostrations on behalf of all sentient beings without exception.” Thus our prostrations are for the benefit of all sentient beings.

You can practice prostrations using Sakya Pandita’s text by itself, or if you wish to also add the Sevenfold Prayer, you can do the Sevenfold Prayer at the beginning or the end. The Sevenfold Prayer is included below.

When doing many prostrations, it is excellent if you can memorize this and recite it with the prostrations. Or if that is difficult, you can do the visualizations according to this text, but recite one of the standard refuge prayers either in Sanskrit, Tibetan, or English as below.

Sanskrit Refuge Prayer:

NAMO GURU BHYE/

NAMO BUDDHAYA/

NAMO DHARMAYA/

NAMO SANGHAYA/

Tibetan Refuge Prayer:

San gye chö dang tsog kyi chog nam la /

Chang chup par du dag ni kyab su chi /

Dag ge jin sog gye pai sod nam kye/

Dro la phen cher sang gye drup par shog.

English Refuge Prayer:

To the excellent Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha

I go for refuge until enlightenment is won.

By the merit of giving and the other perfections

May I attain Buddhahood for the sake of all beings.

Seven-Fold Prayer from the Samantabhadra’s Aspiration to Noble Deeds

With clarity of body, speech, and mind,

I bow without exception to all the lions among men

Of the past, present, and future,
In every world in all the ten directions.
By the power of this Aspiration to Noble Deeds,
I manifest bodies as numerous as all the atoms in all the lands,
Aware in mind of the presence of numberless victorious Buddhas,
And I prostrate to all of them.
I conceive the entire realm of truth
To be completely filled with enlightened ones.
There are as many Buddhas as atoms present in each atom,
Each Buddha surrounded by many Bodhisattvas.
I honor all these blissful lords,
Extolling the ocean of their inexhaustible perfections
With an ocean of all melodies and sounds,
And endless praise.
I offer to those heroic Buddhas
The best flowers, best garlands, best music,
Best ointments, excellent canopies, finest lamps,
And the best incense.
I offer to those heroic Buddhas
The finest robes and best fragrances
And a variety of foods piled as high as Mount Meru, All perfectly arranged.
By the power of my faith in noble deeds I prostrate and present
Vast and unequalled offerings
To each of the victorious Buddhas.
I confess every type of wrong

That I have done
In thought, word, or deed,
Under the influence of desire, anger, or ignorance.
I rejoice in the meritorious deeds
Of all the Buddhas of the ten directions,
The Bodhisattvas, Pratyeka Buddhas, Arhats,
Practitioners, and all sentient beings.
I request all the enlightened protectors
Who have attained the detachment of Buddhahood,
And illumine the worlds of the ten directions
To turn the peerless wheel of Dharma.
With hands folded, I beseech
Those who intend to manifest the final nirvana
To remain for as many eons as there are atoms in all the Buddha lands,
To gladden and benefit all living beings.
May whatever little virtue I may have gained
From prostrating, offering, confessing,
Rejoicing, requesting, and beseeching,
Be dedicated to attaining perfect enlightenment.

Transcribed and edited from a historic video of Venerable Khenpo Kalsang's Dharma teachings by his grateful students on the occasion of his holy birthday, 2015. By this merit, may his life and those of all holy teachers be long and all of their aspirations accomplished.