

## **The Significance of Aspiration of Samantabhadra Prayer (King of Prayers)**

Edited from a Dharma Lecture by Lama Choedak Rinpoche

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Lama Choedak honored and rejoiced in the activities of the founding masters of the Sakya tradition. In particular he honored His Holiness Dagchen Rinpoche's and the late Dezhung Tulku Rinpoche's vision and the prayers of the sangha bringing forth this beautiful monastery in the United States; and he also mentioned that in Seattle the University of Washington was an important center for Tibetan Studies for many years. Then he began his talk with an invocation to Manjushri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom. The following is an edited version of Lama Choedak's extensive overview on Samantabhadra's King of Prayers.

The subject matter we have at hand is a very famous prayer, King of Prayers, and we will study it going verse by verse for you to get a gist of the significance of this prayer in order to increase your enthusiasm to do it regularly in the monastery as well as whenever you do your daily prayers. Foremost among the one hundred thousand sutric prayers, this prayer is King. Just like a king is leader of subjects, this prayer is regarded as chief among prayers.

Samantabhadra is one of the eight bodhisattvas and Samantabhadra is associated with making offerings and dedicating all the offerings he made to multiply its benefit for sentient beings. So every time we conclude any prayer and teaching session, two or three verses from the King of Prayers often is amongst the dedication prayers.

Among the eight holy places in the Buddhist world, four are in China, four are in India. The four in China are associated with four of the eight major bodhisattvas whereas the four holy sites in India are associated with the life of the historical Buddha. One of those four in China near Chengdu is associated with Samantabhadra. It is called Emei Shan which in Tibetan is Langchenyingri. It is a huge mountain upon which the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra resides. Knowing this gives us an appreciation of the spread of Mahayana Buddhism in China. The role of the Bodhisattvas in China is far greater appreciated than in the Indian world.

The sixty-three verse King of Prayers is an extract from the much larger Buddhist sutra called Avatamsaka sutra consisting of six volumes in the Mahayana Buddhist canon in the Tibetan Buddhist Kangyur. There's a difference between prayer and dedication: an aspiration prayer is called monlam and dedication is called sngo-ba. Monlam or aspiration is to offer prayers for results that we seek in the future and then offer those prayers. Dedication refers to having done something good, then asking for it to multiply at the end of activities. Sometimes we can say prayer is dedication, but there's a bit of technical difference between the two. Of the sixty-three verses of Samantabhadra's prayer, sixty-two of the verses are actually the original verses. The last dedication verse is actually added by the Tibetan translators, even though these days very few people

notice whether there's sixty-two or sixty-three. The reason why this monlam does not have 'thus I have heard' the normal prologue at the beginning and the concluding remarks at the end, is because it is an extract from a much larger body of the Mahayana sutra.

Now going more specifically into the contents of the actual sixty-three verses, they can be divided into four parts. First is the cultivating the causes for fulfilling the prayers. To offer prayers is one of the ten paramitas. Other ones consist of generosity and the usual six perfections. In addition to the six perfections, there are upaya paramita which is skillful means, bala paramita, power, spiritual strength, then pranadana, the ninth one which refers to prayers, and the tenth paramita is the yeshe, the primordial wisdom. This is important because you are doing prayers in the Mahayana tradition. The bodhisattva seeks to benefit others by all means, particularly, by giving rise to bodhicitta, loving kindness, and compassion for the benefit of others. Then we try to actualize the bodhicitta by way of learning to give and observe discipline. And I'm sure everyone of you who is following the path are trying to keep the bodhicitta vow and try to actualize, translate the wish into some actions as much as you can. But then there are few things we actually do not quite succeed to fulfill the deeds according to the wishes so then we offer prayers. Hopefully what we could not do, achieve today, maybe we can next time, maybe next life, thus we continue.

The Bodhisattva's prayer also generates the four immeasurable qualities, when you develop loving kindness, compassion, joyfulness, and equanimity. Usually we combine loving kindness with four tools. The first one is prayer. You try to show loving kindness to someone by making a vow that I'm going to be kind to my mother, for example, or I will speak to her kindly, and I won't argue with her. So whatever you might do, you offer prayer. You first vow to yourself and then you show the tool of determination, and even with the tool of determination and vow, sometimes you meet with difficulties, and you don't always succeed in making your mother happy. Even though you try everything according to your list of tried things to do, she's not always easy to please. So when that happens, you use the third tool, the tool of supplication: in the name of the triple gem, you call the names of the enlightened ones asking their blessing that you be able to increase your skillfulness. Then dedicating those things you see every day such as a beautiful garden to be able to make her happy, you make it a habit to increase your skillfulness, not give up, but always add goodness either by one's own inspiration or by learning to dedicate. This shows that bodhisattvas are skillful not only in their vow, but even when they do not completely succeed according to their activity, they don't give up and get disappointed, but offer prayers that things will be different in the future, so long as I offer prayers. That is a very important bodhisattva activity. In reciting the King of Prayers, you are performing pranadanayana, one of the ten paramitas.

There are numerous commentaries on this famous prayer in the Tengyur, including commentaries by Nagarjuna and others. In addition there are many commentaries from Tibetan Buddhist scholars. In the Sakya tradition, there are several by Jamgon Ames Zhabs, Panchen Shakyashri, Panchen Shakya Chokden, and, most notably, the late abbot of Nalendra, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyaltzen. It was from Khenpo Tsultrim

Gyaltzen's writings which I found a copy of in Tibet a few years ago from which I made notes in preparation for this talk and is the source for my references.

Now going to the actual contents of the prayer itself, we cultivate the causes of fulfilling the prayers by first doing the sevenfold prayer. What you notice is that the first twelve verses of the King of Prayers covers the sevenfold prayer. The sevenfold prayer is actually not only the cause for fulfilling the prayers that you will do subsequent to these twelve verses, but also if you look at the sevenfold prayers, they constitute the very remedies to overcome the five cardinal afflictions and karmas that are perpetuated by these afflictions. Paying homage is the first of the sevenfold prayers and that takes up the first four verses. The first four verses totally focus on paying homage. Paying homage is showing respect to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. First, you visualize the immeasurable objects of Buddhas before you. Second, you visualize immeasurable sentient beings equaling the numbers of atoms in the universe. And, thirdly, each and every one of those sentient beings who are present when you pay homage, they are all singing praises with their tongues so that many sentient beings with that many tongues are all offering prayers and singing praises and physically bowing down and verbally singing the praises. With this notion of immeasurable numbers, immeasurable objects, immeasurable motivation, immeasurable beings, and for immeasurable purposes for allaying suffering of each and every sentient being, one pays homage. So paying homage constitutes purifying pride and arrogance. Even if you offer prayers if you have arrogance it will interfere with it. When you offer prayers, you must have humility like a bodhisattva. They are not perfect fixers of the world's sufferings, but they are humble enough to offer prayers while they may not be able to help everyone.

Thus, even bodhisattvas have the danger of spiritual pride when they think: "I can fix all of the world's problems." Of course, so therefore humility is necessary to make your prayers powerful. The first four verses constitute purifying pride and cultivating the virtue of humility. Then, the verses 5, 6 and 7, refer to making offerings. Making offerings is giving. Giving is the first of the six paramitas whether it is giving to the poor, giving to a kind person, charitable causes, or venerable objects. These are the four objects of generosity. When we make offerings, as many offerings to the Holy Beings, enlightened ones, the physically arranged offerings, or mentally imagined, are what we call surpassable or unsurpassable offerings. Of those three verses the seventh verse is about unsurpassable offerings, whereas verses five and six are about surpassable offerings, physically arranged offerings. Offering is giving, giving helps us let go of objects, material objects that are in our possession which are often created by greed and afflictions. By making and giving as an offering the things we own that may be causally tainted by desire and craving, the following can be purified: the causal karma of acquisition, karma of miserliness, and even the negative karma of clinging. All the karma of acquisition, miserliness, and clinging can be purified if one makes the offerings properly as covered in those three verses.

Those three verses are very, very important. Making offerings purifies pride, miserliness, desire, craving and attachments. People who offer prayers, but if they are attached to things, their prayers will be ineffective. We might offer prayers but if we have

a lot of attachment then our prayers won't be very effective. Some people offer prayers and it is very powerful because they have no attachment. They truly give even the results of the prayers for the very causes. They don't want any pie piece for themselves. They want to give all pieces of pie including the plate! (Laughs) Usually when people do something, they want to keep something for themselves. They might keep a piece in the beginning and the last one, and only let the people have one in the middle! That giving is tainted. Attachment and clinging don't make people's prayers effective. You can offer prayers but if you're attached to them, it isn't very beneficial. However, any offering that is given without any sense of attachment is wonderful. When you realize that, you can experience the benefit of giving rather than in keeping an acquisition. People don't realize that until they truly give without attachment.

Verse 8 refers to the third limb of confession of negative karma which is the antidote to hatred. Verse 9, rejoicing in the virtue of others, is a powerful virtue in itself because it's not a virtue you create on your own. But it is acknowledging the virtue of others, from the ordinary to all the enlightened ones. Rejoicing in the virtues of others is the antidote to jealousy. People may make prayers and offerings but if they are jealous of the other group making more offerings than themselves, then all of their own offerings will be jeopardized. When people think, "oh, we are in this group, that other group's offerings are so big, ours should be better than that," if one does that, the merit of the offering gets wasted. Therefore, people must remember when doing the King of Prayers, that jealousy is a hindrance. If one offers prayers but competes with other people's prayers and so on, it's just not going to be effective. Prayer isn't a bypass to law of cause and effect. Prayer actually acknowledges the accuracy of cause and effect. People still have to create the causes who for the prayers to be fulfilled. When Tsongkapa instituted the great Monlam chenmo in Tibet, he generated lots of merit to conceive such an event. He also reached a great level of popularity and veneration. Every single person, on every level including enlightened ones, all enjoyed the fruition of their prayers with correct and complete causes. This seven limb prayer is not just limbs. They are the very thing that makes prayers of anything we do possible. So they are like the limbs of the person who wishes to traverse the path of enlightenment. A person who is crippled cannot go very far. Nor can anyone who lacks these seven limbs make progress in their spiritual realization.

The 5th limb is the request to turn the wheel of Dharma which is covered by verse 10. Verse 10 is requesting to turn the wheel of Dharma because that is the antidote to holding wrong views. People hold so many wrong views. When we hear the teachings of Dharma, we realize we hold wrong views about that, about this, about them, and all of a sudden, we are able to allay lots of our wrong views. In regards to our personal situation, we get a good head wash by hearing the teachings. Then we do not hold those lice ridden wrong views. I'm talking about head lice. (Laughter). People have lots of wrong views and then when they go to teachings, they come home changed and they drop those views and they feel totally assisted by the vision provided by the Dharma. That's why this particular verse is requesting to turn the wheel of Dharma, the request to teach. This is not just a form of prayer but it happens all the time, all these activities of organizing teachings, and actually offering teachings and listening to teaching is the very Buddha

activity that we are making it happen. It's not one of the objectives of the organization, but “the” objective of the Buddha Dharma is to promulgate the teachings. That why I request to turn the wheel of Dharma in order to allay all the wrong views.

The sixth limb is the limb of supplicating the Enlightened Ones not to pass into nirvana. That's covered by verse 11 and it is the antidote to ignorance. Enlightened ones make the teaching possible to exist. And when the teachings exist, people are able to allay their wrong views including innate ignorance, grasping to self as truly existent, and clinging to the virtues that one has created as truly existing phenomena. Such subtle hindrances can be allayed only when we understand the teachings.

The seventh limb is the dedication of merit covered by verse 12, and is the wrapping up of the first six limbs, which is offering the dedication of merit that is accomplished by all the other verses. This is the antidote to doubt. To summarize, these seven limb prayers are direct remedies for all the six root afflictions, or sometimes called the 'six root defilements.' As you may know, Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in all traditions emphasize doing ngondro practices. The older ngondro practices are none other than the elaboration of the seven limb prayer. So anybody who talks doubtfully about the veracity of the Tibetan Buddhist preliminary practices, have not seen this prayer. These are very much covered in the various sutras, the oldest sutras. I think these first seven are very important, the first twelve verses are the causes that can make your prayer fulfilled. There are a lot of activities during the Monlam, such as thousands of lamps offered. You can actually see the form of the activities of these seven limbs happening. People are bowing down, people are offering, people are distributing foods, giving dana, teachings are happening. But are people understanding the causal affliction that they have to combat, and not just displaying a huge offering. Form is easy to create, but the reality is harder. So when people intently say these prayers when they know this, it is a very profound meditation. If a person knows the meaning of the prayers, it is even more powerful, because they will do the prayers knowingly, consciously, and feel the prayer from the depth of their heart. And check that they are not merely parroting but also saying it from the depth of their heart. Therefore, knowing the meaning of the prayers is very important. This prayer is not done just once a year when people gather at the Monlam, for example. This prayer is actually in the prayer books of everyone who does daily prayers.

Then the actual prayer begins with verse 13. As I mentioned before the bodhisattvas pray not to fulfill their own wishes or secure a place for themselves in Sukhavati, but really pray to render help and benefit to others. Now it wouldn't hurt oneself to be included among them, but primarily the purpose of the prayer is to render help and benefit to others. When we attempt to render help and benefit to others, we often meet obstacles. Some people who help and benefit others are very effective. Other people try to do things to benefit others, but instead of helping them, it actually harms the person. They almost regret they offered any help. So it's not that people don't help but often they're offering inappropriate help, ill-timed help, or wrong motivation. This prayer allows us to avoid those causes, and, therefore, be able to help and benefit others. So, how do you do that? Verse 13 makes offering to the past, present, and future Buddhas.

When you offer to the past and future Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the purity of the object of the offering is a far more pure, holy object. They are holy objects of the offering and offerings are purified by the object itself due to the purity of the merit field. If the field is meritorious, then the seed is likely to bear fruit. If the seed is very good but sown in dry sand, it's less likely to grow. Therefore, you have to have a pure merit field. In order to fulfill one's prayers to help other sentient beings, one makes offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Verse 13 is offering to the Buddhas, and verse 14 is praying to them. We are not offering to the Buddhas because the Buddhas need help. Buddhas don't need help. We don't say in Buddhism, "We love Buddha, I can give you offerings." We don't do that. We offer to the Buddhas so that our merit is strengthened to help other sentient beings. Offerings to the Buddhas will increase our merit and then our help to sentient beings will be more effective. By the merit of offerings to the Buddhas we pray that the environment and realms of the sentient beings where they live are free of pollutions. When you read this verse, you can see that the prayer concerns that the realms and environment be clean and pure, just like you have here in these beautiful surroundings, where everything is clean and nice. These conditions are not enjoyed by many people in the world. When the place is clean, it really inspires people to do good things. When places are dirty, things are strewn everywhere, not kept clean, it depresses people, and they may not feel like offering prayers. Therefore, cleaning the temple, keeping the place nice, makes people want to say prayers. Cleaning the temple and keeping the surroundings nice is a very powerful part of the prayer because it delights and inspires others to come to the temple. Therefore, when people volunteer or are assigned to clean the temple, these activities are prayers in action. Thus, in verse 14, we offer prayers that there will be a clean, pollution-free environment and there will be those who make it so.

Verse 15 is praying that sentient beings inhabit pure, clean places free of obstacles and possess harmonious causes. There is ambience; it is so inviting, it delights people. People say, "May I have a fine, pleasing place to practice." Most people struggle to practice at home because their homes are not conducive to having the right ambience to practice. Therefore to have places like this is a result of prayers. That people can meet and come here regularly and do these things. So offering prayers that all sentient beings are able to enjoy clean pure surroundings that are harmonious, that are inviting is what verse 15 concerns.

Though it is important to offer prayers to the Buddhas to empower us to benefit sentient beings and so on, most important is praying that one's own good conditions become perfect for the benefit of others as expressed in Verse 16. If we are not in a good condition, we cannot really help others. We cannot really offer prayers if we ourselves have a lot of worries and anxieties. We have to be completely altruistically filled and enthused by bodhicitta when we offer prayers. Often when we are praying, our minds are actually distracted by worries and anxieties that we have. If we are snowed under those selfish imperfections and self-issues then the prayers will be less effective. Therefore, a person must rejoice in their own good fortunate conditions. Then offer prayers. If they feel very, very pathetic when offering prayers for somebody else, it's a nice idea, but it's

less effective. It does not mean you should not offer prayers when you're feeling down, but it's much better that you rejoice in your own situations and then add a prayer for those who are less fortunate than us.

Even if we are not perfect but we see that in comparison to those sentient beings, "I'm more blessed," thus, I'm in a better position to offer the prayers for them. That is what this verse is talking about: the importance of realizing our own fortunate circumstances and then thinking of those who are not as fortunate as us. And this means that not everybody asks people to say prayers; some people when they see people in robes they say, "Oh, you're a monk, can you say prayers"? They wouldn't ask everybody on the street "can you say prayers for me?" People have this kind of intuition that prayers are more fulfilling by those who are in the right space. It doesn't mean we have to be competitively better than others, but we have to be appreciative and grateful for the conditions we are in, and then be optimistic and aspire for better conditions for others and offer prayers. That's what verse 16 constitutes, praying for harmonious causes to be present: praying to recollect past lives is the cause to not forget Bodhicitta because most people don't remember good things particularly from past lives. They even forget the good things that their mother or father did in this life. They are often asked to remember the bad few things that happened. This is the prayer to recollect the past good things. Because people don't remember past good things, they have no aspiration. They are very pessimistic. Pessimistic people cannot offer prayers. We have to have optimism. The optimism of the person comes from his or her ability to recollect blessings of their life, count blessings of their life; remember when you generated Bodhicitta. If you can remember that and delight and rejoice, then your prayers are more powerful to recollect past lives (past life does not have to mean in a different body, it could be ten years ago or five years ago because that was pretty past life). To some people when they think about what they did five years ago, it looks like a past life. It doesn't have to be past lives as traditional Buddhists would think, but you know, as a contemporary Buddhist, it could be five years ago! We have to be realistic don't you think? There are a lot of modern Buddhists who have issues of whether there is a past life. Even supposedly great scholars. We have to make it reasonable and make these prayers relevant in our own time.

Verse 17 prays to uphold discipline of the ordained in order to prevent the degeneration of Bodhicitta. Now this is beautiful in the sense verse 16 line number 3 and 4 plus verse number 17, all four lines, those six lines capture the importance of offering prayers so that one will be able to uphold the monastic discipline in order to prevent the degeneration of Bodhicitta. This shows the harmony that needs to be between pratimoksha and bodhisattva vows. There are ceremonies that should be conducted by fully ordained monks or a person of a high level of realization in order to make the prayers effective, for example, when we do rituals for the deceased. Not everyone can do them, and it is much better if it is presided over by someone who has the Bodhicitta vow intact and undegenerated. Verse 17 offers prayers so that even if not in this life we have the karma to be ordained, we offer prayers so that we get ordained in the future in order to prevent the degeneration of Bodhicitta to benefit sentient beings.

Verse 18 offers prayers about being able to help and benefit others. Is it talking

about feeding them once a week? Is it talking about giving them a free ride? What are you talking about? We pray to teach dharma so we can actually benefit sentient beings in order for them to hear Dharma. You can't give them many material things and expect them to benefit. That's just temporary, that's just first aid help. We're talking about ultimate aid. Ultimate aid is dharma and they got to be able to hear and understand dharma. That's the best prayer that we can offer. So we are able to turn the wheel of dharma to the sentient beings. Because if they don't hear dharma, even if you do everything, whatever the material or kindness or gentleness, whatever you do they just become just like a, they just become temporary help. Like a first aid help. First aid is only for the person to be able to cope with the situation so that they can get somewhere and get a proper treatment. But the real treatment is not just food and clothes and shelter. Real treatment is they need the dharma. Here one is offering prayer in this particular verse so that one is actually able to turn the wheel of Dharma. We pray to teach Dharma so that beings' Bodhicitta does not degenerate and that it increases and regenerates and that it does not decline in sentient beings' mind both in intent and action.

Verse 19 covers the wish that beings be free from obstacles so that the bodhicitta is not lost to doubt and confusion. When we wish to benefit others but we meet with obstacles, for example, a lot of people meet one or two obstacles even in a negative conversation with somebody, and it kills all the spirit that person had. Some people are so vulnerable that when they meet with one obstacle, they cannot regenerate their motivation. They lose the plot so to speak. And they don't know how to reinvent themselves. This is a prayer for beings who are vulnerable to be free from obstacles and that their little tiny weeny Bodhicitta not get lost to the sudden storm of confusion or doubt or difficulties. This means also that not only are we offering prayers for ourselves to be free from obstacles, but that the causes of obstacles not arise for others. Be wary what you say to others because they may be quite vulnerable. What you say may be harmful, and harm them tremendously. Instead you should create causes for them to stay present in their goodness and give them encouragement and so on. Verse 19, lines 3 and 4, and all four lines of verse 20, concern being free from faults and obstacles.

There are special prayers to remove obstacles; for example, the Padmasambhava prayers and so forth. Verse 20 is also praying that the nature of conduct of individuals is improved. Because people who are not improving or changing their conduct, they are very much let down by their own conduct. Their prayer might be nice, but their conduct is not matching the prayer that they offer to others. We pray in that verse the nature of the conduct of sentient beings be improved. There are prayers to become one who possess excellent qualities because people who don't have wonderful qualities and fortunate circumstances, they cannot assist or influence others positively. In order to do that, we have the ability to find role models to emulate who have noble discipline and undertakings.

Verses 21 and 22 concern how to behave towards people whom we regard as inferior to ourselves. If we regard someone as inferior, we don't know how to behave properly, we may treat them with contempt, look down upon them, discourage them,

belittle them; if we do that, it defeats the purpose of prayers. Therefore, one must be careful to relate with people who are in less fortunate circumstances than we are, and so bodhisattvas pray, “May I be really careful toward people whom I regard as less fortunate than myself, that I do not do certain things that may completely discourage them. May I have good conduct, behave properly towards people who are less fortunate than myself.”

Verse 23 is how to behave toward people who are like-minded, people who are in an equal situation like us. How should we do that? Bodhisattvas who offer prayer must also be sensitive to not be competitive toward people who are like our level, but to speak kindly of them, rejoice with them.

Verses 24, 25, 26: how to behave and treat people who are superior and elders, senior than you, whether they are senior by age, by experience, by knowledge, by their deeds. Always act with respect and courtesy. If a bodhisattva does this then we are promoting happiness and respect, and the respect is very much a result of offering prayer or making homage. If you pay homage with hundreds of thousands of prayers and prostrations, but if you're not respecting someone for whom they are, then it's just like when people act nice only in front of the shrine, but not act nice to people. These verses 24, 25, 26 tell us how we should learn to behave in front of those who are superior and then show them courtesy and respect. Then we actually create causes for the prayer to be fulfilled by paying homage. Now we are actually reaping the results by actually being able to show respect to others. So those verses 24, 25, 26, cover how to behave: may I behave properly toward those who are superior, more senior than I am. Assume there are qualities in others that we do not know about that are far better than in ourselves. And so act with modesty.

The prayer to rely upon one's own treasure of qualities, verse 27, says to not always look for someone else to inspire you. Sometimes we need to look at our own blessings, our own little goodness that nobody may know about. Yes, maybe nobody knows because you haven't sung your praises, but you can every now and then sing into your ears 'by the way, you're fantastic.' (Laughter) Praying to rely upon one's own inner qualities, we should generate self-encouragement. If you're exposed to people who belittle you, put you down, we have to know that we have some degree of goodness so that we don't get affected when others belittle us; we need to give ourselves some credit and rely upon our own goodness. We have Buddha nature, we have refuge, we have precious human rebirth, and we live in America. There are quite a few good points. (Laughter) So you can list half a dozen reasons why you can rely on your own goodness and rejoice. Verse 27 is very important in that regard.

Now for the second part of the praise [of Samantabhadra]: Engaging in infinitely positive activities; verses 28 and 29 are prayers to engage with the infinite forms of Buddha images. This means if you are engaged in activities such as restoring, building, replenishing, cleaning Buddha images, then it has a lot of benefit. You may have been part of the initial building of a stupa or temple. And when everyone sees that in a thousand years, it will have infinite benefits. It will radiate. Try to take part in such virtuous activities such as the installation, cleaning or restoration, or white washing or

painting of Buddha images and the like.

Verses 30 and 31 are about engaging in the infinite speech of the Buddha, such as reciting and chanting the sutras, knowing, memorizing quotations and knowing which are from which texts. This is engaging in the infinite speech activities of Buddha. If you engage in Buddha activities whether publishing the translations, editing, circulating, giving this material to other people, you are engaging with the Buddha Dharma, the Buddha's speech, and promoting them. It is very important to engage in these infinitely positive activities.

Verses 32 and 33: to engage with the objects of the Buddhas, firstly, the measure of engagements, verse 32, and, secondly, how to become engaged with the objects of the Buddhas, verse 33. This part of the commentary is a bit more detailed and I don't have time to go over.

Verse 34 reveals to sentient beings that there are many Buddha realms such as Sukhavati associated with Amitabha, the paradise of the Medicine Buddha, and each of the five Tathagatas has their own realm. It mentions the existence of realms in which each of the Buddhas dwells and teaches and has an entourage, and what particular characteristics these realms have. Being able to talk about this makes people think about such pure realms where one can aspire to be reborn. In revealing Buddha realms for the benefit of others in verse 34 and then verse 35, you are going to seek the Buddha and the teachings. Why you are going to seek the Buddha and the Dharma isn't just for yourself, but also for the sake of others. You are reading the book for the sake of others; you are translating or publishing the book for the sake of others. If you have that kind of attitude, then you are seeking the Buddha in order to benefit other sentient beings.

Often people think they cannot benefit others. But when we know something about the Dharma, we become beneficiaries of it. And then when we think of helping others we realize, if I really were to benefit them, I have to be the connector for them to meet the Dharma, to understand the Dharma, and to hear or read the Dharma. That kind of activity is seeking the Buddha for the sake of others.

We need to make the actual infinite activities of the enlightened ones possible, the infinite conduct to become indomitable, so that our activities do not become weak, easily discouraged, or destroyed by obstacles. So that the deeds and power of our prayers remain strong, verses 36 and 37 tell us about the powers and activities of enlightened ones, like Shakyamuni Buddha. For example: when a country like Tibet goes through many political changes when temples are destroyed, publications texts may cease, but the spirit of the Buddha Dharma, the power of the Dharma instead of getting weaker becomes even stronger. That is very much what we're talking about. No matter what outer difficulties you experience, one should still keep the spirit and the confidence, the refuge in the Dharma, without any kind of discouragement. There are people like Khenchen Kunga Wangchuk who spent years in prison, but whose faith in the Dharma was indeed indomitable. It remained strong and got stronger; the value of the refuge in the teaching was more validated by exposure to that difficulty rather than shaken by it. It is important to offer prayers so that people are able to experience the indomitable quality

of the Dharma and the refuge in the Buddha Dharma. Unfortunately, some people who are still immature have not been able to experience that. When they experience a slight difficulty, they quickly turn their back, turn away from the Dharma, or people in the Dharma. They don't realize that the Dharma is the ever shining sun and that whichever way you turn, there is the Dharma. It is important that whatever difficulty that we face, we should not let these kinds of difficulties destroy the power of the Dharma and faith we have generated by our own practices. The purpose of these prayers is that confidence in the teaching not waver, but become very stable.

Verse 38 refers to the function of prayers such as the example I gave you. Verses 39 and 40 are prayers that our powerful activities become successful. In this second part of the main prayer, the prayers emulate the examples of conduct; it tells us also how we who recite this King of Prayers, are not only offering prayers, but need to behave in a particular way. We are praying that such activities become successful by following examples of enlightened ones.

Verses 41 to 45 are the examples that are beyond worldly matters, and verse 46 gives the examples that are relevant to the world. These verses are the offering of prayers to emulate the good examples of the Bodhisattvas.

The third part of the King of Prayers is revealing the benefits of saying these prayers. If you cleared all the seven causes for fulfilling the prayers by doing the seven-fold prayer (covered in the first twelve verses), then there are the 34 verses you have just chanted since verse 13. All these prayers have benefit. Then verses 47 and 48 outline the brief benefit of saying the prayers because sometimes some people say, "Oh you shouldn't pray, you know, why don't you do something, why do you pray." People think you should do something rather than offer prayers. People offer prayers but don't actually do something. So some people impatiently say, "Why offer prayers, why don't you just go and do it." So the Bodhisattva prays, if I can't do something, I won't give up. Offering prayers is not a substitute for doing, but it is a substitute for discouragement. Thus, offering prayers has huge benefits. Verse 47 outlines the brief benefits with the analogy as elucidated in the text.

Verses 49 through 53: those five verses give details of the thirteen specific benefits of the actual prayer of the King of Prayers. It is said that the first benefit for those who offer this prayer is freedom from being born in the lower realms, and that's why when somebody dies, we straightaway do the King of Prayers in order to prevent them from being born in the lower realms. By the virtue of merit of everybody and love and devotion and the things people do in memory of the deceased, it is to prevent them from going to the lower realms. And the second benefit of the prayer is to be free of bad companions. People need to choose who they go out with and do things with. They need to choose the good companion, because we are influenced by the type of companion we attract. So if you offer prayers of Samantabhadra, then you will know who not to walk with or associate with, so you relatively stay with good friends, noble friends. The third benefit is to behold Buddha Amitabha; that is why when people die, prayers are offered so that the deceased people will be able to behold Buddha Amitabha at the moment of death, instead of being cornered by all the lower realms and hallucination of the eight

ignorances. May they actually witness Buddha Amitabha.

The fourth benefit is possessing beneficial factors. The fifth benefit is good health. If you offer prayers, it will give you blessings of good health, allay karmas of ill health. The sixth one is good fortune in this life; if some good things are happening in your life, you are more likely to do beneficial things for others. Thus, this prayer will increase our own good circumstances so that we are in a better place to help other people. The seventh is that all prayers be answered through Samantabhadra. It says that Samantabhadra offer prayers; he is a bodhisattva who achieved enlightenment through prayers, through offering prayers on top of other activities, of course. Then the eighth benefit [by reciting this Aspiration] is to be [eventually] released from the effects of heinous deeds (the five extreme actions such as committing patricide, matricide and so on). Those who die when you offer these prayers, even though they died as a terrible person, by offering this prayer it will release them from their terrible karmas.

The ninth benefit is to gain wisdom. If you have the habit of offering Samantabhadra prayers daily, it is the wisest decision. When you are confused, upset; don't know what to do; just go and do this prayer; and it would not be a mistake. It would be the wisest thing to do. Instead of going across the other side of the city to meet a counselor (laughter), I'm not saying you shouldn't meet a counselor, but just in case meeting a counselor hasn't been useful; know that just reciting the Samantabhadra prayer, it is far better. It is a very wise thing to do. When you're sad about others; worried about others; don't dwell on these anxieties, but open the prayers, light a candle, and engage in this practice. It will be a great benefit. Lots of people say, "Ah," as soon as they opened the sadhana; and do it regularly instead of spending time worried and sad. They go straight to the practice and totally unseat those afflictions and unseat those worries. And the wisest decision is to engage in the prayer for activities. It means we will gain wisdom. You can see the wisdom of doing prayers.

The tenth benefit is to be reborn with a beautiful, healthy body in the next life. Who doesn't want to do that! Even those who don't believe in future rebirth might do it because just in case, because they believe in the good physical aspects of this life. Many people pray these days to look slim and young even though getting older and fatter. They become devotees and members of gyms, and try to look good, but the real karma of looking good is doing prayers such as this. Gaining to be born with a beautiful body is said very explicitly in the prayers.

The eleventh benefit is that you will not be harmed by demons and spirits if you say the prayer. If you feel there is some kind of spirit harming you or spirit dwelling in your house, you say the prayers and will be protected from the harm being too hard on you. The twelfth benefit is that we will be respected everywhere in the three realms wherever we go. Not talking about the type of position that lasts for five years; and after five years people don't want to know you, not that kind of respect. This is the kind of prayer where our noble qualities, our kindness, our goodness, wherever we go, will be omnipresent. Respectability will be very clear. The thirteenth and last benefit is that we will soon set out to gain enlightenment under the bodhi tree. Not in a nice four bedroom air conditioned house. No one has been enlightened in a four bedroom house. We should go

sit under a tree, or in a little cabin next to a tree. Ultimately, people may slowly have to get out of their comfort zones. Go to sit under a tree. This is a prayer for ultimate enlightenment. Temporarily, of course, in this life we might practice where there is hot running water and that sort of circumstance. But for the real Buddhahood, you reveal ultimate enlightenment under a bodhi tree. The ultimate prayer is “May I be able to go sit under the bodhi tree and attain enlightenment.” That’s ultimate benefit. Shakyamuni Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment came from sitting and doing meditation under the bodhi tree. He sat without moving with bodhicitta as the only object of his meditation. Hence, he attained bodhi under the mahabodhi tree. Why did Shakyamuni Buddha meditate; to achieve ultimate Bodhicitta. What constituted the cause to achieve the ultimate Bodhicitta, he meditated on relative Bodhicitta. Then he achieved enlightenment. In this way, verse 54 concludes with the infinite attributes of the benefit of saying these verses.

Then the verses 55 through 62 are dedicating the merits. Remember I said at the very beginning the prayer covers the benefits of aspiration of prayer and dedication of merit. The dedication of merit is that of dedicating the benefits from saying these verses and the other prayers up until them. Dedicating is sharing. Up until now you’ve been creating causes and doing actual prayers. Then the prayer itself can be dedicated. So it is called monlam. Prayer is a monlam. Mon means aspiration, lam means path. You are creating a future path, a path you are able to tread upon. You are aspiring a way that may be found in the future. Dedication is the aspiration prayer that you have made optimistically with hope for the future and you dedicate that even greater causes will happen. So verse 55 onwards is explicit on how to do the dedication of the merit of anything including these prayers. Remember, what is there to dedicate that is not covered by the seven-limb prayer? Nothing.

The seven-limb prayer constitutes all the causes of enlightenment and then all the dedication you do. When we do a dedication of an opening of a temple or a big inauguration ceremony, we even dedicate that. The conclusion of finishing the temple constitutes generosity, which constitutes giving which constitutes faith and so forth. Dedication for opening a temple is usually done after the good deeds have been completed. After you lay the foundation stone, then you put an appeal to the people; this is just wishing that hopefully people will contribute to build the temple. When the thing is completed then it is dedicated. Like this, the King of Prayers has three sections: first is creating the causes for the prayer, then doing the prayer, and then finally dedicating the merit of the prayers, and for that, verse 55 is dedication by emulating other bodhisattvas. Why do you want to dedicate the prayer you’ve already offered? Why can’t you just let it happen? Just let it take care of itself? Don’t you believe that your prayer will be answered? Why do you have to dedicate again! It’s like reinsuring. Because the bodhisattvas of the past have done it, I, too, am just simply following that. Verse 55 is explicit in that you’re not inventing a new rule here. You are dedicating the merits by following the bodhisattvas.

In verse 56 you are not only following the bodhisattvas, but also emulating the Victorious Ones, the Buddhas. Then we pray that the dedication fulfills not only our

wishes but all the wishes of others as well: wishes of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, as well as all people. There are lots of people wishing many things but they are not happening, so we pray, “May their wishes be fulfilled. Lots of people wish to be kind, so if you keep people in your mind, you can bring them to your attention when you do the prayer. Usually people provide the names, for instance, “Please include so and so in your prayers,” because karma is so interconnected. Next, we pray to realize the true purposes. Verses 57 and 58, regard the true purposes and refer to oneself and others, for one's own purpose and one's benefit, and the purpose and benefit of others.

Verse 59 is the prayer to receive a prophecy concerning oneself, that may you not only be able to follow this path, but may one day be enlightened. Everyone is prophesied in the book of prophecy who will be enlightened and when. A number of the great masters of Tibet have been prophesied in a number of texts of whom and when they will appear to elucidate and to shine the teachings in the world. So may I too be prophesied to become enlightened as stated in verse 59. And if one is already destined to be enlightened and benefit others, then only one who is enlightened can cause other beings to be liberated. Therefore, verse 60 is about encouraging others to engage in noble conduct and to meet the Dharma! Cause others to drop certain things through your skillful means by making them meet the way of the Dharma. Give them the vision of the Dharma so they are able to change. You can see some people change as a result of our little influence. And you can't believe that we too can be such an important connector to make that happen. That people who know that really will never forget that.

Verse 61: pray and wish for others to become successful just as we have been prophesied to be, may they too be successful in that regard. Then verse 62, pray that countless beings attain a pure realm, that beings actually are able to reach the citadel of Buddhahood. Whichever realms they might have a karmic connection to, may they be able to reach there.

Verse 63 was, as I mentioned, added by the Tibetan translators. In translating, most commentators don't take a lot of notice of this. When you look at the Indian commentaries of the actual prayer, there are no commentaries on verse 63. In the Tibetan commentaries and the Tibetan Tengyur version of the prayer and the prayer that we do these days has this verse 63. It is a very obvious addition by the Tibetan translators.

In concluding, before I take a couple of questions, I want to mention that Samantabhadra's prayer, King of Prayers, is among five prayers that all the Tibetan Buddhist traditions do. The other four prayers are: Sutra of Three Heaps, sometimes called Sutra of confession of thirty-five Buddhas; the prayer to be born in Sukhavati; a prayer to Maitreya, and the last one is the tenth chapter of the bodhisattva's way of life. It is Shantideva's prayer of the bodhisattva's way of life. These five prayers are universal to all Tibetan Buddhist traditions when they gather for Monlam prayer festivals. But they specifically count their recitations of the King of Prayers. They may do all the other four-five prayers each day, but they will recite and count this particular King of Prayers many times as possible.

Some of you may know that Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche sponsored by offering the seed money for all the prayer Monlam groups in all Tibetan Buddhist traditions to occur in the early nineties onward. He himself asked all the Tibetan lineages to start doing the Monlams and offered funds to each of those groups. However small at that time it looked, it became a huge factor for the Monlam prayers to occur annually. Everywhere in the whole Tibetan Buddhist world, prayer festivals occur. In old Tibet, the actual main Monlam was held in Lhasa. Lama Tsongkapa started the Monlam festival. They are done during the first ten days of the first fifteen days of the lunar calendar. The first month of the lunar calendar is the month of Buddha displaying miracles. The Monlam is held during that month because the Monlam is not only successful or fruitful by doing prayers, but the Monlam is more successful if done at correct times. So the month of the hundred thousand merit is the most appropriate month, for the collective groups to come together to do the Monlam. So that is perfect quality and the perfect condition of time.

The perfect condition of place is usually to gather in holy places like Bodhgaya, Lumbini, Varanasi, or Kushinagar. When people deliberately go and do the prayers at holy places, it is even more powerful. The perfect condition of congregation is the power of the sangha community when many members or individuals gather. What we call in Tibetan, *gen dun ma sal dung she la ke*, "By the blessings of the congregation of many sanghas," so the power of the multitude of the people who do the prayers makes the power of prayer more powerful. As I have mentioned, the time of the lunar month, the place such as Bodhgaya or Varanasi or Lumbini, and then with a presiding master like the head of the lineage, for example, His Holiness Sakya Trizin and all the great Lamas of the Sakya tradition, always try to be present there to do the prayers together. So with the presiding teacher, with the highest purpose, you can see that the prayers and whatever good things are done, they will be accomplished when all the five positive factors are present, and likewise in our own individual life or community.

When prayers are held together on the full moon, new moon, or a Sunday, and everybody knows that is the day the prayers will happen, that will be the auspicious time. Then all the sangha community gather together and, for example, when somebody passes away, prayers are said, everybody thinks of that person, then the prayer is more powerful when everybody participates. Doing the prayers is a practice to acknowledge the interdependency of activities, interdependent origination. When great masters pass away, we do not need to pray the teachers do not go the lower realms. We must remember there are many purposes for the prayers, for instance, that we are able to meet with holy masters even when they have physically departed. Each prayer has a lot of different functions. So with this, I will conclude here. I would like to hope that not only people say this prayer which was beautifully printed quite a few years ago, but they also intently look deeply into the meanings and say the prayers. Now if you have one or two questions, we will take them before we do the prayer.

*Question:* Rinpoche, I have a question about verses number 61-62, 61 says "Through whatever small virtue I have gathered by reciting this aspiration of Samantabhadra, may all the virtuous aspirations of living beings be accomplished in a single instant." So it

says 'small virtue', and then in 62, it says “Through the boundless merit.” So why does it say “small virtue” in one verse and the next verse it says “boundless.”

Lama Choedak: Good question. Verse 60 says that, "Through whatever small virtue I have gathered by reciting this Aspiration of Samantabhadra." They are using the word virtue here. Virtue and merit are two different things. Whether that is quite captured by the English translation is the problem I think. But the Tibetan, the gewa and the sonam. Gewa, just virtuous action. Sonam is meritorious. Gewa could be a virtuous action, but if it is not dedicated, it is not yet merit. So, therefore, small virtue but once it is dedicated it could be boundless. So that's the difference.

*Question:* You were saying there's a mountain in China that is associated with Samanthabhadra.

Lama Choedak: Emei Shan. It's near Chengdu. On top of the mountain is a huge elephant, four-faced elephant, elephant four directions on top of that Bodhisattva Samantabhadra sits. Langchenyigri we call it in Tibetan. I've been there a few years ago.

Recitation of the Aspiration of Samantabhadra in Tibetan first by Lama Choedak Rinpoche. Then in English by Lama Choedak Rinpoche together with those present at Sakya Monastery.

*Please forgive any errors in the transcript.*

*Transcript respectfully submitted by Cydney Kawamura.*

*February 10, 2013*

*Edited and corrected by Stephanie Prince, July 2016 to facilitate an easy to read edition.*

*Please forgive any errors of omission and addition.*