



An Explanation of the Avalokiteśvara Sādhana Called *All-Pervading Benefit of Beings*

His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche ■



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Thangtong Gyalpo



If there is a practice that encompasses the essence of all Dharma and is simple yet when practiced accordingly, one will obtain results—would you be interested in such practice?

Why do sādhanas always emphasize on the preliminary practices such as taking refuge, compassion, and so on? What are the main differences between a master and a beginner?

In this teaching, His Holiness introduced a simple but powerful sādhana practice to us in detail. One may find the answers to the above questions in this text.

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Introduction

Briefly, a story about the origin of Avalokiteśvara. Once, Buddha Shakyamuni was preaching. He seemed happier than usual that day; he was smiling more than usual. His disciple Ānanda asked him why he was smiling. The Buddha answered, speaking to those assembled about Avalokiteśvara. As he spoke, rays of light issued from his heart and traveled to the Pure Land where Buddha Amitābha dwells. Then, touching Amitābha, the light rays produced Avalokiteśvara from Amitābha's heart. As you know, we commonly depict Avalokiteśvara with Amitābha on his crown. Various deities are understood to represent the good qualities of the buddhas. Avalokiteśvara is the manifestation of the compassion of all the buddhas. Similarly, Tārā is the manifestation of the activity of the buddhas, and Mañjuśrī is the manifestation of the wisdom of the buddhas.

About the origin of the sādhana: One of Tibet's great masters,

Thangtong Gyalpo, lived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. He is an unusual historical figure because he was not only a great Dharma master, he was also a master of engineering, construction, and other things. *Thang* means “great vast land.” *Tong*, from *tongpa*, means “empty.” *Gyalpo* is “king.” Hence, Thangtong Gyalpo means “king of empty land.” He acquired this name because of his excellence in meditation practice. Because he was dedicated to learning, he was also given the name Tsöndrü, which means diligence.

Once upon a time, Thangtong Gyalpo wanted to cross a river, but the boatman would not let him board because of his unkempt and slovenly appearance. He cared only about the study and practice of Dharma, so he did not pay attention to his appearance. In those times, too, crossing the wild river could be dangerous. Many people and animals perished because it was unsafe. Reflecting on this, and after his experience with the boatman, Thangtong Gyalpo decided to build a bridge over the river. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Tibet, there was no advanced technological knowledge like today. But somehow, Thangtong Gyalpo learned not only to mine, refine, and work with iron, but to build iron structures. Lacking the money for this large enterprise, in the beginning, he begged for money. Realizing that begging would not attract the funds that he

needed, he founded a Tibetan opera company. Seven or so Tibetan female performers joined the group, and they raised enough to complete the construction project. In the Himalayan region today, especially Bhutan and Tibet, you can still find bridges that he constructed—all told, about fifty or sixty bridges. This was all in addition to his Dharma activities.

Different sources state differently, but he seems to have lived until about 120 years of age—itsself an accomplishment. Among other Dharma activities, he founded the practice called *maṇi* dungdrup, which became very popular in Tibet, in which a group of people gather to chant the Avalokiteśvara mantra a hundred million times. This practice originated with a vision in which Avalokiteśvara bestowed many teachings on Thangtong Gyalpo.

The sādhana that we are studying today was among these teachings given to Thangtong Gyalpo. Avalokiteśvara told him that the *maṇi* mantra would become very significant. Meditational deities have karmic connections with sentient beings, and Avalokiteśvara, in particular, has a strong connection to the Himalayan region. You may have noticed that many Himalayan peoples chant the *maṇi* mantra; it is a common practice in the Himalayan region.

Sometimes, talking among themselves, people will say that the *maṇi* mantra is too simple or too common, and that they want something more sacred or higher. But if you listen to your guru, you will know that this short and seemingly simple mantra is the combination of all of the Buddha’s teachings condensed into six syllables in the form of a mantra. It is very powerful—so much so that you do not need anything else. Avalokiteśvara said that merely through this *maṇi* mantra, many people will be liberated from saṃsāra.



The Sādhana

Preliminary Part

The first part of the sādhana is the refuge prayer. Every sādhana, like all Buddhist practices, begins with taking refuge. In whom do we take refuge? We go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. Why do we take refuge? This is a crucial point. One's motivation determines—ahead of the practice itself—the blessing and the merit that is received from the practice. We go for refuge motivated by these three factors: *fear* of the suffering of saṃsāra, *faith* in the Triple Gem, and *compassion* for all sentient beings who are in saṃsāra.

There are six realms in saṃsāra. The three lower realms are the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm, and the hell realms. The three higher realms are humans, demigods, and the realm of the gods. If you look carefully, all six realms are full of suffering, even the higher ones, including the realm of gods. Such beings might appear to be happy,

but if we consider their situation carefully, it is evident that they are not.

The gods enjoy great luxury, and everything there is beautiful. However, they still experience the limit of their lifespan. As the end of life approaches, they have power that enables them to see their own coming death and where they will take rebirth. Yet since they have spent their lives indulging in enjoyment, they have exhausted whatever merit they possessed, and they will fall now into the lower realms. They can see these things, and so they are very fearful as death approaches. In the demigod realm, beings are full of anger and jealousy. Because they wish to enter the god realm, they are always making war. However, they are always defeated by the gods. Hence, they suffer.

In the human realm, we experience the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death. These sufferings are unavoidable. No human being escapes the suffering of these natural processes. In the three lower realms, the suffering of the animals includes the fear of being eaten by others and the fear of being drafted to labor by humans. The hungry ghosts suffer terribly from hunger and thirst. Finally, in the hot hells and cold hells, there is such immense suffering that no explanation is needed.

Humans are placed in the middle of these six realms, in a position lower than demigods and gods. Nevertheless, a human birth is considered to be the best for Dharma practice. This is because we have opportunities to receive the teachings and to practice them that are not available in the other realms.

Some might think that what I have said so far is basic teachings, material for beginners. However, I believe that contemplation on the sufferings of saṃsāra creates a strong foundation for Dharma practice, even if we have heard these things many times before. Also, knowing about something and believing it are two different things. You might know intellectually that there are hell realms and hungry ghost realms, but do you really believe it? This is why I urge all of you to contemplate these things earnestly.

By generating a clear, vivid understanding in this way of the entirety of saṃsāra and the suffering of the six realms, we will be able to take refuge with genuine fear, faith, and compassion: fear of the sufferings of saṃsāra, faith in the Triple Gem, and compassion for all sentient beings in saṃsāra. This is a necessary preliminary practice, instilling the right motivation at the beginning for performing the main practice of the sādhana.

Another teaching that can help us understand saṃsāra is the teaching on the four endings. It is said:

The end of gathering is separation.

The end of accumulation is exhaustion.

The end of height is to fall down.

The end of birth is death.

Whatever it is that you are trying to accumulate and preserve in this life, one day it will be lost. Gatherings will all be dispersed. Consider this gathering of people right now: when the teaching is finished, we will part ways. Whatever exalted status you acquire and whatever power, all of it will end in loss. All those who are born will die. These reflections on saṃsāra can help us turn to the Dharma with the right motivation.

Furthermore, in saṃsāra's cycle of birth and re-birth, all sentient beings have been our relatives—have even been our parents and our children. Thinking on these things, generating loving-kindness and compassion for them, on this basis, we develop the thought of enlightenment, the wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. In the Mahayana, practice should never be about attaining enlightenment for oneself alone. Instead, after looking

carefully at saṃsāra in all these different ways, we should decide to follow the Buddhadharma for the sake of all sentient beings. This should always be our motivation for practice, and this includes today as we learn about this sādhana of Avalokiteśvara.



Main Part

In the main part of the sādhana, you should visualize that you are surrounded by all sentient beings. Above your head and above everyone's head, there appears a white lotus; on top of this, a moon disc, and above that, the letter hrīḥ (ॐ). Visualize that Avalokiteśvara appears out of the letter hrīḥ. He is white in color, with one face and four hands. White symbolizes the purity and clarity of the Buddha. Avalokiteśvara is Chenrezik in Tibetan; *chen* is the Tibetan word for "eye." Avalokiteśvara looks compassionately upon all sentient beings. Of four hands, one pair are folded at the heart. This gesture of prayer shows Avalokiteśvara calling to all buddhas and bodhisattvas to bless all sentient beings and guide them to liberation. With the other pair, in the right hand, he is holding a crystal rosary with 108 beads. The clarity of the crystal symbolizes that he is able to see all sentient beings with his compassionate gaze at all times and without obstruction. He never tires and never ceases to liberate sentient beings from saṃsāra. In the left hand, he holds a white lotus symbolizing compassion. He is adorned with many colorful garments and ornaments, and he is wearing deer skin draped over his left breast. This symbolizes his compassion toward all sentient beings.

Amitābha appears above his crown. This is because Avalokiteśvara originally emerged from Amitābha’s form. His two legs are crossed in the lotus position, symbolizing the union of wisdom and emptiness. Behind his head, there is another moon disc. The moon’s coolness represents the cooling of the heat of anger and desire and the pacification of all negative emotions. Finally, you should think that all of your gurus and all buddhas and bodhisattvas are combined in this form of Avalokiteśvara in front of you. This is the visualization.

Next, we pray to Avalokiteśvara to bestow blessings on us and all sentient beings while we make prostrations, reciting this prayer:

རྫོག་ལྷོན་གྱིས་མ་གོས་སྐྱ་མདོག་དཀར། །
jowo kyön gyi ma gō kudok kar

*Precious lord, your body white
and unblemished,*

རྫོགས་མངས་རྒྱས་གྱིས་དབུ་ལ་བརྒྱན། །
dzok sangyé kyi u la gyen

*Your crown adorned with the
perfect buddhas,*

ལྷགས་རྗེའི་རླུན་གྱིས་འགྲོ་ལ་གཞིགས། །
tukjé chen gyi dro la zik

*Your eyes of compassion gazing
on all beings—*

རླུན་རས་གཞིགས་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚམ་ལོ། །
chenrezik la chaktsal lo

*Avalokiteśvara, to you I pay
homage!*

Recite these four verses as many times as possible.

The Seven-limb Prayer

Next is the seven-limb prayer, also called the seven-fold prayer. Its purpose is purification before reciting the mantra.

- The first limb is paying homage to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas.
- The second is making offerings, like flowers, food, music, or whatever one wishes to offer the buddhas and bodhisattvas.
- The third limb is confession. We should confess all of our sins, not only the sins of this life but of all our past lives.
- The fourth limb is rejoicing. We rejoice in all good deeds and in the teachings of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Rejoicing in good deeds that are performed by others is beneficial for oneself. If someone has saved a life or given food to the needy, for example, and if we rejoice in what they have done, then we are accumulating merit ourselves because of someone else's good deed.
- The fifth limb is to request all the buddhas and bodhisattvas to turn the wheel of Dharma, to give teachings and blessings.

- The sixth is to request all the buddhas and bodhisattvas to remain and to continue guiding us by giving teachings for the sake of our liberation from saṃsāra and the attainment of buddhahood.
- The last limb is the dedication prayer. In dedication, whatever merit has been accumulated from the prayer is distributed to all sentient beings. Unlike giving away tangible objects, whenever we give our merit away through this inward practice, our own store of merit is not diminished in any way but increased.

Recitation of the Mantra and Prayer to Avalokiteśvara

Next is a prayer to Avalokiteśvara. When we recite the prayer here, think that you are calling out to your guru, who is also Avalokiteśvara. The deity is everything to you, everything you see and hear. You are asking Avalokiteśvara to please liberate you and bring you closer to him. It is a long prayer, with the *maṇi* mantra after each section.

After completing the prayer, visualize that through the powers of your request and through Avalokiteśvara's power, light rays issue from his body. They touch you and purify all your negative emotions. The whole outer environment is transformed into Dewachen, the Pure Land of Amitābha.

The difference between great masters and beginners is that the former really believe in the visualization. As beginners, we know what we are supposed to visualize, but we do not necessarily believe in it. Our chanting and visualization will be more powerful and give greater blessings and merit, the more we can practice them with belief. Believe that everything you see is Avalokiteśvara, that the environment around you is Dewachen, and that every sound you hear is the *maṇi* mantra. Your body, speech, and mind is

entirely united with Avalokiteśvara’s body, speech, and transcendental wisdom.

At this point, recite the *maṇi* mantra. Earlier, I said that the *maṇi* mantra contains the entirety of the teachings of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. The *maṇi* mantra consists of 6 syllables: *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ* (ཨོམ་མཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ་).

Oṃ (ཨོ) has three graphic elements representing three sounds: Ah (ཨ), O (ཾ), Ma (མ). These three elements symbolize the body, speech, and wisdom.

Maṇi means jewel in Sanskrit. It also refers to method. Avalokiteśvara has many forms, and in one well-known representation, he is holding a wish-fulfilling jewel. Thus, *maṇi* is both jewel and method.

Padme means lotus in Sanskrit. It also refers to wisdom. In the visualization of Avalokiteśvara, he is holding a rosary and a lotus. All the buddhas’ teachings are the combination of wisdom and method. In this way, the six syllables hold all the buddhas’ teachings.

Hūṃ represents the combination of wisdom and method. A bird cannot fly with one wing. Likewise, we need both wings of wisdom and method to work together to be liberated from saṃsāra.

Another mantra, even shorter, is *oṃ āḥ hūṃ*. One should think that these are one's body, speech, and mind. Then pray, "Through wisdom and method, bring me to you and liberate me from saṃsāra."

These are simple and powerful practices that are easy to perform. All the buddhas' teachings use skillful methods to teach us with great wisdom. Although the *maṇi* mantra holds all the buddhas' teachings, I believe that many neglect it because they think that it is too easy or too simple. But when it comes to the Dharma, even the simplest teachings are powerful. There are many different deity practices, for example, simple ones and complex ones. All of them are skillful methods, so that there is no difference between them. It does not matter whether your deity has two, or four, or many hands; what matters is *how* you practice.

I am frequently asked why are there different deity practices. We have different deities because we think we are different. All the deity practices are methods for us to be liberated and achieve enlightenment—there is no difference between them. Similarly, people ask me if I see a problem in applying the Buddha's teachings from 2,500 years ago in the twenty-first century. Well, it is like having different cuisines—Italian, French, Chinese, Indian, American, British. We sometimes

forget that taste is secondary. The most important thing is that gives us nutrition, allows us to live and survive. In this respect, the cuisines are the same. Taste, color, and other external factors are secondary.

In the past, people had headaches and physical pain just like today. They also had the same problems that we have with jealousy, anger, and so on. Today, whether someone is Chinese, American, French, Italian, British, or Russian, it is obvious that we all share the same problems, despite feeling that we are different in appearance, culture, language, etc. It is exactly the same when we view the past. Inner problems like attachment, ignorance, desire, and anger: these are all the same.

The Buddha did not teach about external things but about inward ones. He taught how to turn our attention inward and how to control our minds. It is the mind that tells us whether something is good or bad; the mind causes our experience of happiness or sadness. If we take control of the mind, then we have control over the entire world. No matter what kind of situation we might face, we will not experience it as a difficulty if we remain in control of our minds. You never see the great masters in a hurry. They are always proceeding at the same speed and pace because they control their minds. For us, however, even small things can cause anger or other emotions. We let ourselves be affected.

All the teachings, so diverse for so many different beings, are ultimately concerned with how to address attachment and the negative emotions. To put it in a simple and “worldly” way: when you can control your mind, then you are basically liberated. I do not mean control for only a few seconds; I mean that the mind should be placed in that state forever. Liberation does not mean that you go to a different planet, a next life, or somewhere else.

We are all here as Dharma students because we have realized that we want to control our anger, desire, and ignorance. We believe that the Buddha’s teachings can help us. We all understand that the negative emotions are the reason we are in saṃsāra. But our practice is going to be profoundly different depending upon the degree to which we believe in ourselves. Sometimes people tell me that they feel as though they are just ordinary, simple people, doing a simple sādhana. I cannot look into their minds, but I think I understand where they are coming from. I can look into my own mind, and I know how much ignorance, anger, and desire I have. So, someone feels that they are not such a great person, or even a very good person, or very worthy. Again and again, I tell them this: there is no such thing as merely a simple practitioner. If you are on the path and doing the practice and trying, then there is no such thing, because you have already

taken the big step. Regardless of whatever practices you are doing, you have to believe one hundred percent that your practice will help all sentient beings. As I said before, even simple practices have the same power to liberate as complicated sādhanas. Maybe we cannot cover a thousand steps in one leap, and so we proceed one step at a time, the first step to the second, and so on—but all the way to the thousandth. For this, it is important that we believe in ourselves.

Remember that all the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and our holy gurus appeared in saṃsāra to teach, but they did not teach everyone everywhere. Instead, they chose students that they felt were worthy of receiving the teachings. If someone is not worthy, they will not receive the teachings. Take today, for example: Thangtong Gyalpo believed in all of us, put his trust in us, and decided to share this teaching with us that he received from Avalokiteśvara. I believe that if he showed such belief and respect towards us, this honor, then it is our turn to show a little faith in ourselves. All the buddhas are omniscient. They know the past, present, and future. If Avalokiteśvara foresaw that future followers were not going to practice this teaching, then he would not have given it to Thangtong Gyalpo. Furthermore, our guru, Thangtong Gyalpo, and Avalokiteśvara, all of them believe in us. Avalokiteśvara and Thangtong Gyalpo

and all the buddhas are always there seeing us. It is only because we lack merit and possess negative karma that we are unable to see them. They are able to see us, and they are always present in all ten directions. For this reason, we should not think of them as ordinary persons—thinking, for example, that if I do not tell them the bad things I have done, then they will not know. It does not work that way. We would only be lying to ourselves.

Outwardly, the buddhas appear differently, but inwardly they are all the same. A few days ago, I was giving a Guru Padmasambhava teaching. In the text, it says: he is always just outside the door. As soon as you open the door, he will come in. He is already waiting for us, even if we are not waiting for him. If we believe in ourselves and believe in the teachings, then everything will be changed so that whatever merit you gain will be multiplied many hundred-fold.

We should believe in our gurus, their gurus, and so on, back to the first lineage guru, who in this case is Thangtong Gyalpo, who received the teaching directly from Avalokiteśvara. They all believed in one another and so passed the teaching to their students. Along with belief, we should practice the mantra without attachment or ego, keeping the mind calm. If some emotion or thought arises, then you should

notice it, thinking “there is this thought,” and then let it go, and meditate on emptiness.

Conclusion

In the concluding section of the sādhana, you call out to the Buddha Avalokiteśvara, asking him to liberate all sentient beings and bring them to his state. This is the dedication of merit, whatever merit you have gained from this practice, to all sentient beings. It is important, as I explained earlier, because it is where your merit gets multiplied.

This completes the explanation of the sādhana.





Ngulchu Thogme

How to Think About the Pandemic

I was asked to talk about the pandemic. From a Buddhist point of view, I think that there is not much special going on here. Sickness and death are always present: before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the pandemic. It is always our karma that will determine whether we will experience sickness and when we will die. There are three things keeping you alive now: life, karma, and merit. If one or two of these factors grow low, then we can do practices such as releasing lives, Amitābha practices, and others to restore the two factors. However, if all three factors are exhausted, then there is nothing that can be done, and no one, not even the buddhas, can prolong your lifespan.

There are two types of karma: individual and collective karma. We can say that the pandemic is the collective karma of sentient beings. Also, as followers of the Buddha, we believe in truth and reality, and so we will just have to accept it and go through it.

Long ago in Sakya, there was a great master named Ngulchu Thogme. He followed not only the Sakya school but masters from other schools. A student asked him what to do in the cases of getting sick and not getting sick, having wealth and not having it, dying and surviving. These are the questions he asked Ngulchu Thogme.

Ngulchu Thogme answered him that we become sick because of our previous karma, and so we should think that it is a good thing to undergo sickness. It means that our bad karma is exhausting itself. In fact, the more suffering there is, the more bad karma is exhausted. Hence, we should rejoice. And if we are not sick, then this is good, too. It means that we can do more good deeds and more practices to accumulate merit.

If we are wealthy, this is good. It means we can do many things to help others and accumulate merit. But if we are very poor, we should also rejoice because this means that the problems of our ego will no less severe for us. Without so much force of negative emotions, we will be able to perform great virtuous deeds. Either way is good, rich or poor.

If we are facing death, this is the product of our karma. Death is something that we all have to go through. Dying means that the number of bad deeds that we can perform in this life

is coming to an end. On the other hand, if we live, this is good, too. It means that we will have more opportunities to practice Dharma in this life.

Finally, I would like to quote the great master Śāntideva: “Why worry if there is a solution? And if there is no solution, why worry?”^[1] In other words, whether we feel that we have a solution or not, we should not worry. With the Dharma, we are in good hands. We have great masters, we are practitioners, and we are able to face the challenge.

Notes:

[1] “Why be unhappy about something / If it can be remedied? / And what is the use of being unhappy about something / If it cannot be remedied?” Śāntideva. *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. Translated by Stephen Batchelor. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.



■ His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche, is the second son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

At an early age, Rinpoche undertook his training in the principal rituals and prayers of the Sakya lineage. Rinpoche has received from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen most of the major initiations, empowerments, oral transmissions, blessings, and pith instructions that are inherent to the Sakya lineage. Furthermore, Rinpoche has received numerous common and uncommon teachings from some of the pre-eminent teachers of Tibetan Buddhism of our age.



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