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The Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Joshu

KUNZANG LAMA'I
SHELUNG

*The Words of My
Perfect Teacher*

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2. Offering the seven branches

The Vajrayāna path includes many methods and is without great hardships. It is intended for those with sharp faculties. If we constantly train ourselves to accumulate merit and wisdom with a strong mind, everything that would otherwise take a whole great kalpa to accumulate through the six pāramitās can be accomplished in an instant, and liberation can be attained in a single lifetime.

There can be no doubt that the single most excellent, secret and unsurpassable field of merit is the vajra master.²⁴⁹ That is why the practice of accumulating merit is combined with the Guru Yoga. The seven parts of the Offering of the Seven Branches include all the innumerable methods for the accumulation of merit and wisdom.

2.1 PROSTRATION,²⁵⁰ THE ANTIDOTE TO PRIDE

For this practice, visualize that you are emanating a hundred, then a thousand, then innumerable bodies like your own, as numerous as the particles of dust in the universe. At the same time, visualize that all beings, as infinite as space itself, are prostrating with you. The words for this part are:

*Hriḥ! I prostrate, emanating as many bodies
As there are particles of dust in the whole universe.*

In general, when you practise the entire “five hundred thousand preliminaries”²⁵¹ it is correct to combine prostrations with the refuge practice, and that tradition is often followed. But in the present teaching the actual explanation of prostration is given here, so to combine prostrations with

the Guru Yoga is a perfect way to practise them.

An important point when doing prostrations is to link body, speech, and mind. As you physically prostrate with your body, recite the text of the prayer for the prostrations with your speech. With your mind, consider that you are doing prostrations in the company of all beings and practise with respect and devotion, relying entirely on the teacher and confidently surrendering yourself to him. Otherwise you will end up just saying whatever you like and looking around everywhere, while your mind chases after all sorts of external events. A passer-by or someone talking on your right will draw your eyes and your attention in that direction, and you will find your joined hands pressing against your left cheek. When someone comes along on your left, you will look round and listen on that side and your joined hands will end up touching your right cheek instead. You must understand that to make an outward show of doing prostrations like that, letting your mind be taken over by distractions while your body lurches up and down by itself, is just a physical ordeal that serves no purpose whatsoever.

When you prostrate, cup your hands together in the shape of a lotus-bud about to blossom, leaving a space in the middle. It is not right to press your palms tightly together leaving no space between them, nor to touch together only the tips of your fingers. The *Sūtra of Great Liberation* says:

I join my hands above my head
Like an opening lotus-bud,
And with countless bodies amassed in clouds
I prostrate to the Buddhas of the ten directions.

And *The Treasury of Precious Qualities* says:

Make a sign of reverence at your heart,
Your body bending low without distraction,
Your hands as though they cupped a flower bud
And held together like a relic case.

Put your hands together and place them on the crown of your head, then at your throat, and then at your heart, to purify the obscurations of body, speech and mind respectively. Then touch the floor with your body at five points, the forehead, the palms of the two hands and the two knees,²⁵² in order to purify the obscurations of the five poisons and obtain the blessings of body, speech, mind, qualities and activity. Then stand up straight, put your hands together again and continue the prostrations in

the same way.

It is not right to wave your arms around without placing your hands together. Nor should you just bend forward without touching your knees and forehead to the ground. Nor should you stay bent over when you get up, without standing up straight again. To prostrate like that is disrespectful. It is said that the fully ripened effect of doing prostrations without standing up straight is to be reborn as a hunchback dwarf. We do prostrations in the hope of benefiting from them—so there is no point in doing them in a way that will only result in a deformed body.

Even if you cannot do many prostrations, make the effort to ensure that however many you can do, they are all done impeccably. It is meaningless to try to make prostrations easier by doing them on a slope, such as the side of a hill, or by any other such methods.

Moreover, nowadays when people pay their respects, visiting a lama for instance, they do one prostration that is almost correct and then follow it up with two more for which they just bend over. That, supposedly, is how important people do it—and most ignorant people follow their example. But it is an extremely vulgar way to do prostrations. The purpose of asking for teaching, even on such simple things as how to do prostrations, is to hear the teacher explain whatever it is one does not know, and then to put it into practice all the time without forgetting any of the details. If people cannot even put into practice something so simple to learn and so simple to do, studying the Dharma becomes completely meaningless and fruitless. Those who have studied the Dharma should be more proficient than those who have not, even in their manner of doing simple prostrations.

When Jetsun Mila went to ask Lama Ngokpa for teachings, he arrived while Lama Ngokpa was teaching the *Hevajra Tantra* to a large assembly of monks. Mila paid his respects by doing prostrations from afar. The Lama was delighted.

Taking off his head-dress, he prostrated to Mila in return, saying, “What an auspicious interruption! That person doing prostrations over there is doing it in the style of the disciples of Marpa of Lhodrak.* Ask him who he is.”

Anyone who follows a teacher and receives his teachings ought to be like a piece of cloth being soaked in dye. As he learns to emulate the actions of his respected master, there should certainly be some noticeable change from how he was before. When a piece of cloth is dyed, it may

* Milarepa's root teacher, and Lama Ngokpa's also.

take the new colour more or less successfully—but how can it fail to change colour at all? Nowadays, there are people who have received the Dharma hundreds of times but who still fail to improve themselves in the least, and behave exactly like ordinary worldly people in all respects. All the Dharma has produced is impervious practitioners, violators of samaya. It is said:

The Dharma can inspire evildoers to change, but it cannot inspire practitioners who have become impervious through Dharma—just as grease can soften stiff leather, but cannot soften the leather of a butter-bag.²⁵³

Once you have learned about the benefits of positive actions, the harmfulness of negative actions and the qualities of the Buddhas, merely to subscribe to those beliefs is not enough; you still have to arouse the sort of certainty and faith that can truly transform your outlook. Otherwise, even the perfectly enlightened Buddha in person would not be able to help you. The Great One of Oḍḍiyāna gives the following warning:

Do not surround yourself with disciples who have strayed into just talking about the teaching, but whose minds have become impervious to it.

Do not associate with companions who set limits to their samayas.

Even if you only understand one word of the teaching, you need to recognize how to mix it with your mind and put it into practice. The purpose of following a teacher is to observe his thoughts, words and deeds and learn to do as he does. As the proverb goes:

All actions are only imitation:
Those act best who imitate best.

In this way, you should let the teacher's outer, inner and secret qualities be imprinted on you, like a *tsa-tsa* coming out of its mould.

"Prostration" is a general term describing a gesture of homage and respect. There are many different ways to do prostrations, and customs vary from place to place. However, in this case your teacher has taught you how to do them according to the words of the Conqueror. So knowingly to prostrate in the wrong way, whether out of pride or in order to make it easier, is an act of disrespect and a demonstration of contempt. It should also be understood that to do prostrations as though paying a tax serves no purpose and will only bring the wrong results.

Proper prostrations, on the other hand, bring immeasurable benefits.

Once, when a monk was prostrating to a stūpa containing hair and nail clippings of the Buddha, Ānanda asked the Buddha what the benefits of such an act might be. The Buddha replied:

A single prostration is so powerful that if, as a result, one were to become a universal emperor as many times as the number of grains of dust beneath one's body down to the lowest depths of the earth,²⁵⁴ the benefits of that act would still not be exhausted.

And in the sūtras it says:

The unfathomable crown protuberance on the Buddha's head comes from his having respectfully prostrated before his teachers.

Prostrations will finally lead us, too, to obtain the unfathomable *uṣṇīṣa* that crowns the heads of the perfect Buddhas.

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you can in this way,