

## An Avalokiteśvara Sādhana

Janet Gyatso

*For All Beings Throughout Space* is an example of a tantric sādhana, or “means for accomplishing,” as the term is translated in Tibetan (*sgrub thabs*). A sādhana is a meditative visualization technique by which a Buddhist attempts to “accomplish” identification with the Buddha Śākyamuni, or any of the other buddhas, bodhisattvas, or enlightened deities in the tantric Buddhist pantheon. *For All Beings Throughout Space* describes a visualization of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, depicted here in his four-armed guise. Avalokiteśvara is well known in Mahāyāna sūtras and tantras as well as in local traditions throughout Asia and appears in a variety of forms in addition to the one described here.

The theory of sādhana meditation is discussed in a number of Sanskrit and Tibetan works. In brief, practitioners imagine themselves as having become a particular buddha figure. This visualized identity is effected in three dimensions of personhood: bodily form, verbal expression, and mental state. It is believed that by visualizing themselves as having the prescribed features of the buddha figure in these three dimensions—as looking like the buddha figure, as chanting its mantra, and as assuming its mental state—the meditator will eventually become that buddha in reality. The assumption is that a person’s identity, experience, and existence are self-created, and therefore can be manipulated at will, given the appropriate training and (a universally stipulated prerequisite) a prior receipt of the sādhana technique in a transmission ritual given by a qualified teacher. Another assumption underlying sādhana practice is that the manifest features of the buddha figure so depicted in the text—that is, its iconography, its mantras, and the descriptions of its state of mind—precisely reflect that figure’s enlightenment state as such, and thus are efficacious tools to effect the desired transformation from imagined identity to reality. Such a transformation in the practitioner is said to be possible in a single lifetime, a claim that is often made about the efficacy of tantric practice in order to contrast it favorably with the more gradually obtained results of sūtra-based practice, said to require many lifetimes.

Although the theory of sādhana practice would seem to imply that the manifest features of a buddha figure are strictly determined, in fact the many sādhanas extant in Sanskrit and Tibetan for a given buddha or deity figure vary considerably, both in the description of the deity and its mantra and in the visualization technique prescribed. This is due to the nature of the source of the sādhanas, which in many cases is characterized as a vision experienced by the sādhana’s author. Since the deity seen in a vision can differ from its normative iconography, so too the sādhana based on that vision can be innovative as well. Such variation is sanctioned by standard Mahāyāna theory, which posits that buddhas and bodhisattvas change appearance at will in order to accord with the varying needs of sentient beings. This theory also made possible the incorporation of local Tibetan deities into Buddhist canons.

The *For All Beings Throughout Space* sādhana is said to be based upon a vision of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (a “direct transmission”) experienced by Tangtong Gyelpo (Thang stong rgyal po). This eclectic Tibetan yogin and Buddhist teacher of the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries was also a civic engineer who built over fifty iron-chain suspension bridges in Tibet, western China, and Bhutan. *For All Beings Throughout Space* is universally attributed to Tangtong Gyelpo, but the text is not signed, and there is no independent historical information on its composition; the first commentary on the text that assumes his authorship is written in the early sixteenth century.

Tangtong Gyelpo’s interest in public works is reflected in the pithy brevity of the *For All Beings Throughout Space* sādhana, features that distinguish it from other Tibetan Avalokiteśvara sādhanas, which tend to be long and complex. Valued for its simple yet suggestive content incorporating the meditation styles of the “inner tantras,” the text is perhaps the most popular (and shortest) Avalokiteśvara sādhana in Tibet. It can be chanted by heart by many persons, both lay and monastic, of both genders, from many parts of the country, in all the Tibetan Buddhist sects, and at all levels of society.

*For All Beings Throughout Space* employs several notable techniques. One concerns the relationship between the practitioner and the visualized figure. Some sādhanas instruct practitioners to imagine the buddha figure sitting in the air in front of them, sending rays of light and blessings into them, but not effecting an identification of the practitioner with the buddha, a technique called the “generation in front”; other sādhanas prescribe that the practitioner imagine his or her mundane body and experience as having dissolved into emptiness and been replaced by a new appearance of the self as the buddha figure, called the “self-generation” (see chapter 14). The *For All Beings Throughout Space* sādhana represents a middle position between these “in-front” and “as-self” types of visualization: it begins with a third variation, a visualization of the buddha figure “on top of the head” of the practitioner, but culminates with a full identification of the practitioner with that figure.

The sādhana starts, as is standard in Buddhist practice, when the practitioner “takes refuge” in the Buddha, his teachings, and the community of his followers. The sādhana’s author does not supply a liturgy for this initial step, instead allow-

ing practitioners to insert verses of their choice. The *sādhana* proper commences when the practitioner imagines him or herself to be seated in meditation and surrounded by all beings in the universe. That the ensuing images are seen as occurring simultaneously in the experience of all these beings, rather than being limited to the practitioner, is another distinctive feature of this *sādhana*.

A lotus flower sprouts out of the practitioner's (and all beings') fontanelle at the top of the skull. Poised above the tips of the flower's petals is a moon-shaped cushion upon which the visualized bodhisattva will sit. Reflecting tantric theories of embryology, the appearance of the bodhisattva is preceded by a mantric "seed syllable," which is thought to encode the enlightenment of the figure that it symbolizes and to be capable of generating the figure itself, just as the seed of parents gives rise to a child. The syllable here is *hrīḥ*, which is often associated with Avalokiteśvara. As the commentaries on the *For All Beings Throughout Space* *sādhana* explain, the practitioner imagines the *hrīḥ* to be formed of brilliant white light rays that become so intense that they spontaneously reformulate into the full-blown figure of the bodhisattva. The practitioner then focuses on imagining the bodhisattva on his or her head as described in the *sādhana*. The description is close to the four-armed Avalokiteśvara's traditional iconography. Each element is significant: the white color of his body signifies cool compassion; the lotus held in his hand symbolizes the bodhisattva, whose beauty grows right in the "mud" of *samsāra*; the antelope hide signifies the bodhisattva's compassion for all sentient beings; and so forth. The two "upper" hands here are in the homage gesture; other four-armed Avalokiteśvaras hold a wish-fulfilling gem in those hands. The buddha Amitābha sits on his crown because Avalokiteśvara belongs to the "family" headed by that buddha.

The prayer of praise that the practitioner, along with all sentient beings, sings to the bodhisattva functions as an invocation. The bodhisattva, moved by the sincerity with which the praise is uttered, emits liquid light rays that enter the top of the head of the practitioner and all sentient beings, filling their bodies, dispelling all confusion and bad karma, and transforming the practitioner into Avalokiteśvara. Simultaneously, the light rays spread over the entire universe and turn the environment ("the outer container") into the pure land of Avalokiteśvara, and all beings (the "inner contents") into Avalokiteśvara. While visualizing this sequence, the practitioner repeats the most famous of the Avalokiteśvara mantras, *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ* (see chapter 2). All the while, the practitioner remains focused upon the empty nature of the mantra's sounds, and of the images being visualized, which are maintained in mind during the mantra recitation period.

At the end of the mantra repetition, the practitioner enters into meditative absorption, endeavoring to set aside all conceptions, including those prescribed by the *sādhana* itself. Such a contemplative phase is often included in *sādhana*s, and its description is close to that of other sorts of Buddhist practices, such as insight meditation or Chan sitting, with the exception that it is framed, and evoked, by visualizations preceding and succeeding it.

The final portion of the *For All Beings Throughout Space* *sādhana* corresponds

to what is termed "carryover practices" in certain tantric traditions. Emerging from the meditative absorption and returning to daily life, the practitioner endeavors to continue to see all perceptions of body, speech, and mind as those of the enlightened bodhisattva. All sentient beings, including the self, are to be seen as the bodhisattva; all sounds are understood to be his mantra; all mental phenomena are seen as his mind. The *sādhana* concludes with the conventional "sharing of merit" that has been gained by performing the practice, here phrased as an aspiration to win enlightenment as Avalokiteśvara in order to help the rest of the world achieve liberation as well.

The translation below is of the '*Gro don mkha' khyab ma*, single-page block print, widely available. The text is published in several collections, including 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po and 'Jam dbyangs blo gter dbang po, eds., *Sgrub thabs kun btu's* (Dehra Dun: G. T. K. Lodoy, N. Gyaltzen, and N. Lungtok, 1970), vol. Ga.

### Further Reading

For more on the life and accomplishments of Tangtong Gyelpo, see Janet Gyatso, "Genre, Authorship, and Transmission in Visionary Buddhism: The Literary Traditions of Thang-stong rGyal-po," in *Tibetan Buddhism: Reason and Revelation*, ed. Steven Goodman and Ronald Davidson (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 95–106. For a detailed study of Tibetan tantric liturgy and *sādhana*, see Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

The Direct Transmission of the Great Adept Tangtong Gyelpo, "King of the Empty Plain," Entitled *For All Beings Throughout Space*

[First] take refuge

On the crown of my head  
 And that of all sentient beings throughout space  
 Is a white lotus and a moon [-shaped seat].  
 On top of that is [the syllable] *hrīḥ*  
 From which [appears]  
 The precious, noble Avalokiteśvara.  
 He is white and luminous  
 And he radiates light rays of five colors.  
 He is beautiful and smiling  
 And he sees with compassionate eyes.

Of his four hands,  
 The palms of the upper two are held together.  
 In the lower two  
 He holds a crystal rosary and a white lotus.  
 Silks and precious ornaments adorn him.  
 He wears the hide of an antelope across his chest,  
 And a crown ornamented by Amitābha.  
 Seated with his two legs in the crossed thunderbolt position,  
 He leans his back against a pure moon.  
 He is, by nature, the epitome of all refuges.

Think that I and all sentient beings are praying to him, in one voice:

Lord,  
 You are unmarred by fault,  
 And white in body hue.  
 The perfect buddha ornaments your crown,  
 And you see beings with compassionate eyes.  
 I bow to you, Avalokiteśvara.

Recite that three, seven, or as many times as possible.

As a result of this one-pointed prayer,  
 Light beams radiate out  
 From the body of the noble one,  
 And purify defiled karmic appearances and confusion.  
 The outer container becomes the Land of Bliss.  
 The inner contents—the body, speech, and mind of beings—  
 Become the perfected form, teachings, and heart-mind of  
 Avalokiteśvara.  
 Appearance and sound turn into indivisible awareness-emptiness.

While meditating on that, recite the six syllables [the mantra *om maṇi padme hūṃ*]. At the end, remain absorbed in the own-state of no-conception about the three circles [doer, done-to, or deed].

My and others' bodies are the perfected form of the noble one.  
 Voices and sounds are the rhythm of the six syllables.  
 Memories and thoughts are the expanse of great primal consciousness.

Through the merit resulting [from performing this visualization]  
 May I quickly come to achieve [identification with] Avalokiteśvara,  
 And then may I establish every single being without exception in that  
 state.

# — 17 —

## A Fasting Ritual

Roger Jackson

Fasting rituals have been an important element of religious life in Tibetan culture areas for centuries. The collected writings of many of Tibet's greatest lamas include the texts of fasting rituals, and, in more recent times, anthropologists have explored the social and performative dimensions of the rite. In most places, the fasting ritual or *nyungne* (*smyung gnas*) is held annually and draws members of the laity to the local monastery or temple for three days of prayer, prostration, and ascetic practices focused on the great compassionate bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara or Chenrezi (*Spyan ras gzigs*). Though there is no solid historical evidence that the type of fasting ritual practiced in Tibetan culture areas originated in India, Tibetan writers do trace the lineage of its practice back to India, and the Tibetan rite clearly combines in it a number of elements that are crucial to Buddhism in India, and elsewhere in Asia.

Socially, the fasting ritual is an instance of a common Buddhist phenomenon: occasions on which laypeople are permitted for a time to participate in the life of their society's most valued religious institution, the monastery or temple. The hallmark of such occasions, whatever their locale or duration, is the assumption by laypeople of some of the vows incumbent upon monastics. In lands throughout Buddhist Asia, laypeople will gather on new- and/or full-moon days (in Tibetan areas, more often the lunar tenth or twenty-fifth days) at their local monastery or temple, observe eight vows (against killing, stealing, lying, sexual activity, using intoxicants, eating after noon, entertainment and ornamentation, and taking an exalted seat), and spend the day praying, making offerings, and listening to religious discourses. The eight vows also may be taken for life by men or women who wish to renounce the world outside the monastic context, or women who wish to live a monastic life but are barred from doing so by the loss of the lineage of ordination. Women also may take for life the same ten vows as a novice monk (the eight listed, with the seventh divided into two and the promise not to handle money added as the tenth). The Tibetan fasting ritual is most closely modeled on the traditions involving lay attendance at monasteries and temples on lunar cycle

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Princeton Readings in Religions is a new series of anthologies on the religions of the world, representing the significant advances that have been made in the study of religions in the last thirty years. The sourcebooks used by previous generations of students, whether for Judaism and Christianity or for the religions of Asia and the Middle East, placed a heavy emphasis on "canonical works." Princeton Readings in Religions provides a different configuration of texts in an effort better to represent the range of religious practices, placing particular emphasis on the ways in which texts have been used in diverse contexts. The volumes in the series therefore include ritual manuals, hagiographical and autobiographical works, popular commentaries, and folktales, as well as some ethnographic material. Many works are drawn from vernacular sources. The readings in the series are new in two senses. First, very few of the works contained in the volumes have ever been made available in an anthology before; in the case of the volumes on Asia, few have even been translated into a Western language. Second, the readings are new in the sense that each volume provides new ways to read and understand the religions of the world, breaking down the sometimes misleading stereotypes inherited from the past in an effort to provide both more expansive and more focused perspectives on the richness and diversity of religious expressions. The series is designed for use by a wide range of readers, with key terms translated and technical notes omitted. Each volume also contains an introduction by a distinguished scholar in which the histories of the traditions are outlined and the significance of each of the works is explored.

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