



Green Tara

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Green Tara Practice

Advice of His Holiness Chogye Trichen Rinpoche on:

The Practice of the Goddess Green Tara

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Introduction

Regarding the practice of Tara, she is an enlightened being on the twelfth bhumi or stage of enlightenment, able to fulfill all the wishes of beings. Tara is the manifestation of the compassion of all the Buddhas of the three times. She is also the goddess who carries out and accomplishes the enlightened activities of the Buddhas.

There have been countless Buddhas of other aeons and eras. In the beginning of our aeon, there was a particular Buddha, the Buddha of that era, known as Mahavairochana. In the time of this Buddha, there was a great king who had a daughter by the name of Princess Metok Zay, Princess 'Beautiful Flower'. (1) Princess Beautiful Flower was devout in prayer, and carried out marvelous activities to benefit other beings. While still a young girl, Princess Beautiful Flower made vast offerings and dedications, performing generous, courageous, patient, and compassionate activities of the greatest virtue on behalf of sentient beings.

When Buddha Mahavairochana asked the Princess what it was she wished for, what was the intent of her heart, she replied, "I shall remain in this world until every single being is fully liberated."

This was a joyful surprise to the Buddha, who had never heard anyone offer such a noble, selfless, and courageous aspiration. In response to her personal sacrifices, her virtue and aspirations, and inspired by her wishes on behalf of beings, Buddha Vairochana spoke spontaneously the prayer of the twenty-one praises to Tara, a praise to twenty-one qualities of Tara.

As a result of this praise spoken by Buddha Vairochana, it came to be known that Princess Beautiful Flower was the emanation of the goddess Tara, who had originally come forth from the tears of compassion shed by the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, or

Chenrezig.

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva had immense compassion for other living beings. Although he strove ceaselessly to help other beings, he felt great sorrow that so many beings continued to fall helplessly into the lower realms of existence such as the hells. He saw that very few beings were making progress on the path to enlightenment.



H.H. Chogye Trichen
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In utter despair, out of unbearable compassion, Avalokiteshvara cried in anguish, praying that it would be better that his body be broken into pieces and he die, since he was unable to fulfill his task of rescuing living beings from suffering. From his tears of compassion, the goddess Tara arose.

Upon appearing miraculously in this way, Tara spoke to Avalokiteshvara, saying, "O noble one, do not forsake the sublime task of benefiting sentient beings. I have been inspired by and have rejoiced in all of your unselfish deeds. I understand the great hardships you have undergone. But perhaps, if I assume the form of a female bodhisattva with the name of Tara, as a counterpart to you, then that might assist you in your most worthy endeavors."

Hearing this aspiration by Tara, Avalokiteshvara was filled with a renewed courage to continue his efforts on behalf of beings, and at this time both he and Tara were blessed by Amitabha Buddha for their commitment to the bodhisattva path.

At the time when Avalokiteshvara had cried out in despair, his body broke into one thousand pieces. Amitabha Buddha then blessed his body so that Avalokiteshvara arose in a new form with eleven heads, and with one thousand arms with an eye in the palm of each hand. In this way, we can see the close connection between Avalokiteshvara and Tara.

It is said that since that time, whoever will recite this praise to the twenty-one Taras spoken by Buddha Mahavairochana is sure to receive incredible benefits. Buddha Vairochana was able to fulfill all of his wishes. Even for Buddhas, there are times when they are unable to satisfy the needs of some sentient beings. However, after giving rise to this praise to the twenty-one Taras, Buddha Vairochana was able to not only fulfill all of his own wishes, but he was also generally able to fulfill all of the wishes of all who approached him.

Once an old woman came to Buddha Vairochana. She was quite poor, but had a daughter who was extraordinarily beautiful. This daughter had a royal admirer who desired her hand in marriage. In ancient India, if a peasant girl was to marry royalty, it was the custom that the girl's family should try to provide at least the jewelry to be worn by the bride. The impoverished old woman had no means with which to obtain jewelry for her daughter's wedding.

This woman had heard that Buddha Vairochana could grant anyone's wishes, and so she approached him. She came before the Buddha, asking if he could give her some jewelry so that her daughter might marry the king and fulfill the wishes of many people. At that time, Buddha Vairochana was staying in the Bodhi temple of Bodhgaya.

At the Bodhi temple there were many images of Green Tara. As he had no jewelry of his own to give her, the Buddha requested of one of the special images of Green Tara at the Bodhi temple that she give her crown to him, so that he could please the old mother and that her daughter might become a queen. This statue of Tara removed her own crown, and presented it to Buddha Vairochana, who was able to then offer it to the woman for her daughter's marriage.

It is said of Green Tara that not only will she give to beings whatever they may need, but also that she is able to allay each of the major fears of beings, such as the eight or sixteen common fears of beings which include fear of robbers and thieves, fear of water, of snakes, of poison, of imprisonment, and so on, as well as all the inner fears. Whatever fears beings suffer from, whenever they would recite the twenty-one praises to Tara, or even merely recite her ten-syllable mantra, OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SVAHA, their fears have been pacified, and their needs have been fulfilled.

Buddha Mahavairochana appeared in a very, very ancient time, far before the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. It is also said that later, in our own era, Buddha Shakyamuni himself spoke the exact same prayer, repeating the words of Buddha Vairochana. This is recounted in the Kangyur collection of the words of the Buddha.

Thus, Tara was also greatly praised by Buddha Shakyamuni himself. In this way, the prayer to the twenty-one Taras carries immense blessing and power. Countless

Mahayana Buddhists chant this praise every day; whether they are ordained or lay practitioners, whether they are young or old, this prayer has resounded as a constant murmur in the mouths of the faithful, since long before our present aeon.

In much more recent times, Tara has been the goddess relied upon as a meditational deity by many of the greatest masters in Buddhist history, great Indian Mahayana Buddhist philosophers and Mahasiddha adepts, such as in particular the esteemed Indian masters Nagarjuna and Aryadeva. The Indian pandita scholar Chandragomin had visions of Tara and received direct transmission from Tara. So many of the greatest of these masters have been devoted adept practitioners of Tara. The Indian Mahasiddha Virupa, founder of the Lam Dre lineage of Buddha Hevajra, received blessings from Tara.

One of the greatest Indian masters, who had a very important role in introducing the practice of Tara in Tibet, was the Bengali pandita scholar Atisha. Atisha had been invited many times to visit Tibet, but he had always refused, having heard about the high altitude and harsh climate of Tibet, as well as the unruly and uncouth character of the Tibetan people. He doubted that he would be able to go there and really turn their minds to the path of dharma.

The Indian master Atisha, being a great devotee of Green Tara long before he journeyed to Tibet, one day received a prophecy from Tara. Tara herself told Atisha that he should go to the land of snows, Tibet, where he would, like the sun, illuminate beings with the teachings of the Buddha, dispelling all their darkness.

In this way, he would bring great benefit to the sentient beings in the northern countries. Tara further told Atisha that there he would meet a great disciple of his, one who would be in fact an emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. She prophesied that the combined activities of Atisha and this disciple would cause the teachings to flourish for thousands of years and spread everywhere.

Only after hearing these prophetic words spoken by Tara did Atisha relent in his judgments regarding Tibet and the Tibetans, and he resolved to go to Tibet. Although Atisha did face some initial difficulties in Tibet, such as not finding qualified translators and meeting with harsh conditions, nonetheless in time he did meet up with his prophesied disciple, Dromtonpa. Dromtonpa went on to become the founder of the Kadampa school, which became the source from which the Dalai Lama incarnations have arisen.

It is from the influence of Atisha that the teachings of Green Tara came to flourish in Tibet. Although the earlier Nyingmapa tradition worshipped the goddess in various forms, this was not so widely spread until Atisha came to Tibet and propagated the praise to the twenty-one Taras. These are some of the blessings and gifts of holy Tara.

Chandragomin was another of the great Indian masters who played a significant role in the spreading of the traditions of Tara. He was not a monk, but was an upasaka, a lay practitioner holding eight vows.

Due to such masters, the praise to the twenty-one Taras, her mantra, and rituals, spread to all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, all of which continue to rely on the practice of meditation on Tara. There are a great many stories of spiritual masters in Tibet who relied on Tara as their meditation deity.

In the sixteenth century in Tibet was a very great master called Jonang Taranatha. 'Tara' means 'savior', 'Natha' means 'protector' in Sanskrit. He was said to be in an almost continuous direct communion with Tara herself. He sought out Indian Buddhist traditions when there was almost nothing left of the Buddhadharma in India, and was said to have found and recovered many sources of dharma teaching.

Taranatha wrote an elaborate history of Tara and her practices. He was very careful about dating and identifying different Indian masters who were associated with the practice of Tara. Taranatha's writings on Tara survive in his collected works, and there are English translations of this work that include explanations of the twenty-one praises to Tara.

There are specific mantras for each of the twenty-one forms of Tara. Specific forms of Tara can be invoked for particular obstacles or fears, and one can practice them in this way once one has received empowerment and transmission of the twenty-one praises to Tara.

To set the benefit of these blessings of the Buddhas, of Tara, and of all these masters, in motion, it is said that after receiving the transmission of the twenty-one praises to Tara, one may choose to recite this praise, or recite the long dharani form of Tara's mantra, or even just recite the ten syllable mantra of Tara. One may recite any or all of these three, whether it be early in the morning, or in the middle or the day, or in the evening, or in the middle of the night. It is said to be especially important and helpful to recite these whenever one's mind is troubled and cannot be pacified by other means.

One whose mind is so troubled may speak about their problems to some friends, but still they remain disturbed. Friends may support our point of view and understand our fears, yet still, our wishes are not fulfilled. Even if they are supportive and agree with us, our problems still remain; just because they are in sympathetic agreement with us does not mean they are able to truly help us. It even happens that one may be worse off than before as a result of such friendly consultations!

On the other hand, any faithful devotee may recite the twenty-one praises to Tara, or may recite the long dharani mantra or even the short mantra of ten syllables, OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SVAHA, whenever they may be in crisis. When their needs and wishes are being denied or frustrated and cannot be fulfilled, leaving them feeling crippled or confused, if at this time they pray to her, she will be there to heal their fears and tribulations.

This approach presents us with an alternative to our ordinary response to difficulties. When we are troubled, normally we would immediately seek out a friend or counselor to validate our misery. Wishing to find comfort and pacify our turmoil, we may instead stir things up and actually make them worse. Another approach worth trying is that we might instead recite the praise to the twenty-one Taras, or recite her mantra, and in this way find the comfort and resolution we are looking for.

The practice of Tara is also very beneficial and effective for dharma centers. Those centers that do the pujas or prayer rituals of Tara find themselves rewarded with success, as their wishes for the spread of the teachings of Buddha are fulfilled! Deep and heartfelt wishes that we give rise to out of inspiration and devotion are much more easily fulfilled, especially when they are for the sake of others!

Virtually every Tibetan monastery performs Green Tara puja prayer rituals every morning, whether they have five monks or one thousand. The praise to the twenty-one Taras has been chanted continuously by countless beings stretching all the way back to Buddha Vairochana in an earlier age long, long before our present era. The fact that this prayer is so ancient and has been so popular and widely practiced over the ages contributes to its great power and effectiveness.

All the accumulated blessings of that have arisen due to the prayers of the faithful throughout the ages come down to us and are received by us when we pray with faith and devotion to Tara. Through regular practice of the praise to the twenty-one Taras and the mantras of Tara, these blessings are cultivated and can ripen in our mindstreams, in our experience. It is for this reason that the worship of Tara makes such an excellent daily practice.

This praise to the twenty-one Taras is also very important to the Chinese traditions of Mahayana Buddhism that have connections to Vajrayana Buddhism.
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Receiving the Blessings of the Bodhisattva Tara

Entry into the path of meditating of the bodhisattva Tara begins with empowerment, the transmission of her enlightened wisdom and blessings.

When we receive the transmission of the blessings of green Tara, for example, we first offer a mandala to the Guru who we should visualize and really feel is actually the goddess Tara herself, present in front of us. One visualizes the Guru in front of us as Tara. One also visualizes that Tara is present in the mandala on the shrine in front of us.

From the heart centers of these two Taras, brilliant light shines forth which strikes ourselves and all sentient beings. This radiating light transforms our ordinary bodies of flesh, bones, and blood, and we become an orb or ball of light, a mass of light. All ordinary phenomena dissolve into a state of emptiness. We rest our minds naturally in that state, remaining in this state which is the presence of light within emptiness, the clarity of emptiness. Within this emptiness, everything is possible.

The place where you are is the pure realm of Tara, the Turquoise Realm known as "Harmony of Turquoise Leaves". You are no longer in your ordinary form, but have the nature of a ball of light. Any sounds you hear are the echo of the mantra of Tara. Any thought that may arise or occur to you is wisdom, emptiness. All phenomena, everything, is like space. There is nothing mundane or ordinary that remains.

Next, there appears a lotus flower and on that flower a letter 'AH' transforms into a moon disc. Upon that moon disc is a blue seed syllable HUM, which emanates brilliant light that spreads throughout the universe. It strikes all living beings, purifying all their obscurations and sins.

The radiating rays of light also make offerings to the enlightened ones and are then re-absorbed back into the letter. From the transformation of this letter, which represents the nature of one's own mind, oneself appears as Tara.

She is green in color with one face and two hands with the feet drawn in. Her right hand is stretched out over the right knee with the palm in the gesture of supreme generosity. The left hand is in the gesture of granting refuge, with the thumb and ring finger touching and holding the stem of an utpala, a blue lotus flower, which reaches up to her left shoulder. The utpala in Tara's hand has three flowers. One of these is still a bud, one is fully blossomed, and one is slightly dried up.

Tara is a beautiful emerald green color; she is of the nature of light. Tara is adorned with all the magnificent ornaments, crown, necklace, and so forth, as well as silken garments. Her posture is graceful, with her right leg slightly outstretched and her left leg pulled slightly toward her.

At her forehead is the white letter OM, representing the body of all the Buddhas; at her throat is the red letter AH, the speech of all the enlightened ones; at her heart is the blue letter HUM, which is the mind of all the Buddhas. In fact, your body, speech, and mind have always been the holy body, speech, and mind of the Buddhas. So far, you have perceived these to be impure. In order to transcend this, visualize your three places with the syllables OM, AH, and HUM. On top of the syllable HUM, one should also visualize the syllable TAM, the seed syllable of Tara.

In addition, the Guru also appears in the same form of Green Tara, as well as the appearance of Green Tara on the shrine.

Within the heart of oneself appearing as Tara and in the hearts of the Guru appearing as Tara and of the Tara visualized on the shrine is a small form of Tara. Within the heart of this tiny Tara is a minute letter TAM, the seed syllable of Tara herself.

Brilliant light shines from the hearts of the Guru and of Tara on the shrine. This light fills the universe, spreading in all the ten directions to the Buddha realms and reaches to all of the enlightened ones, invoking infinite blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, summoning their wisdom and compassion.

Especially, this light goes to the realm "Harmony of Turquoise Leaves", in the Potala paradise in the southern direction, where the wisdom aspect of Tara resides. Now all the enlightened ones assume the form of Tara. There are in the space above and

around us millions and billions of Green Taras of exquisite appearance that rain down upon us and are absorbed into our bodies. The largest of these may be huge like mountains, the smallest no more than the size of a sesame seed.

Like a giant storm gathering from all the ten directions, all of these shower down upon us and are absorbed into us. In an empowerment, this is known as the descent of blessing, and is extremely important.

Now one clearly visualizes the syllables of the three vajras, OM, AH, and HUM, at the forehead, throat, and heart, respectively. One also visualizes the samadhi meditation aspect in one's heart as the tiny Tara figure. All of these are clearly visualized in oneself appearing as Tara, in the master appearing as Tara, and in Tara who appears on the shrine.

Next, rays of light shine from the heart of the Guru, inviting all the deities of initiation to appear before the Guru in the sky, and the Guru flings nectar from the initiation vase. Simultaneously, the deities bestow initiation by pouring nectar from vases they hold in their hands. This nectar enters through the tops of our heads, completely filling our bodies and overflowing at the crown of our heads, where it takes the form of the Buddha Amoghasiddhi.

In this way you should then feel that you have received the blessings of the enlightened form, the body of Holy Tara, and as a result of that, the effects of previous misdeeds and sinful actions done in the past is removed. One's own physical form becomes indivisible from the form of Tara, and you are empowered to meditate upon yourself appearing as Tara. From now on, you should never see yourself in an impure form, but should instead always regard yourself in the form of Tara.

For the blessing of the enlightened speech of Tara, one imagines that within the heart of the Guru and the Tara on the shrine there is the letter TAM surrounded by the mantra of Tara. Rays of light issue from the TAM in the heart of the Guru and from the shrine Tara. Now we recite the mantra OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SVAHA. As we do so, like bubbles rising up in water, from the mouth of the Guru in the form of Tara and from the mouth of the shrine Tara, the letters of the mantra issue, and are absorbed into the seed syllable TAM in your heart.

They are absorbed into the samadhi aspect, the tiny Tara in the center of our hearts. These letters now arrange themselves around the TAM on the moon disc in the heart center of the tiny Tara in our hearts. The seed syllable TAM in Tara's heart is surrounded by the ten syllables of her mantra.

Next one would imagine that all the blessings of the enlightened speech of all the Buddhas take the form of letters of the mantra of Tara, and all these rain down upon us. These letters enter us through our mouths, and are received by the wisdom aspect, the Tara appearing in our hearts. Once more we repeat the mantra.

Here one would feel that all vocal impediments, all obstacles in relation to one's speech are purified. All the effect of previous non-virtuous acts of speech is also purified. One is empowered to recite the mantra of Tara.

Next is the blessing of the mind. For this, one focuses on the Tara on the shrine, the Tara on the mandala. Now one arouses even greater devotion for Mother Tara, and supplicates her to bestow her blessings. From her heart emanate countless flowers like the utpala blue lotus held in her left hand. All these are absorbed into us through the tops of our heads.

Finally, one would imagine that light shines forth and transforms all of the inanimate universe into the celestial palace, and all sentient beings are transformed into the form of Tara. Rest the mind briefly in this state, where everything is known to be like a dream.

In this way one may receive the blessings and the consecration of the enlightened body, speech, and mind of Tara, and also receive the blessings from the vase of initiation. One then offers a mandala in gratitude for the blessing.

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Meditation on Green Tara

On the basis of preliminary trainings and practices, as well as based on receiving the blessings of the Bodhisattva Tara, one is able to perform the meditation on Tara and recite her mantra.

The entry into Buddhist meditation in the Mahayana tradition begins with lojong, training the mind. Of utmost importance is the development and training of compassion.

How do we develop this training? First, we meditate on the kindness shown to us by our mothers. Our mother carried us in her womb and gave birth to us. She fed us and cleaned us when we were helpless babies. Remembering her kindness, visualize your own mother.

As you meditate in this way on your mother, generate love and gratitude toward her. Once you have given rise to this feeling, you can begin to extend this feeling to others, until gradually you are able to extend the feeling of love and gratitude to all living beings in the course of your meditation.

This is possible because in the past since time without beginning, every being has in fact been your own kind mother. As is said in many refuge prayers, 'For all sentient beings who have been my mother, I take refuge.'

Another possibility is that you can also meditate on the love a mother has for her only child, and in the same way extend this feeling to all sentient beings.

Once you have done this, the next step is to begin to give rise to compassion. Understanding the kindness shown to you by your mother, you would never wish to see your mother suffer in any way. This wish to remove your mother from all suffering is compassion. Put yourself in her place, feeling her troubles and whatever hardships she has to suffer. Once this feeling of compassion has arisen in your heart, then you can extend it to others until it comes to embrace all living beings. One genuinely understands the suffering of others and truly aspires to remove them from suffering.

In this state, one is ready to take refuge. Here it is important to understand that you can only take true refuge in a truly free being. It won't ultimately help you to take refuge in all the different worldly gods, just as a petty lord cannot truly protect you in the way a king can.

There are also other mind trainings you can also do to prepare in meditation for the taking of refuge. It is very helpful to reflect on the benefits of altruism as opposed to the apparent benefits of self-interest. All misfortune and suffering actually comes directly from pursuing one's own interest at the expense of what might be best for others.

It is equally true that all benefit and good fortune in fact derives from putting the welfare of others first. What it all comes down to is that if you work only for your own benefit you end up making trouble for yourself. Working for others guarantees that good will come to you in the future.

Likewise, the practice of virtue is an essential part of training one's mind in the dharma. For example, if you have been generous in the past, you will be experiencing prosperity and abundance in the present. If we have been patient in the past, then whoever sees us will automatically be attracted to us and feel positively toward us, giving us power and influence.

Of particular importance is the training in ethical conduct. If one does not practice ethical discipline in this life, it is difficult to gain future human births. Our birth as human beings at this time is due to some previous practice of moral discipline. Such discipline is the true foundation for any and all real qualities to arise.

The basis for this discipline is the practice of virtue. In practice, this means renouncing

The basis for this discipline is the practice of virtue. In practice, this means renouncing the ten non-virtuous deeds. These are: (1) killing, (2) stealing, and (3) sexual misconduct for the body; (4) lying, (5) slandering, (6) speaking harsh words, and (7) idle gossip or meaningless speech for the deeds of one's speech; and (8) thoughts of avarice and covetousness, (9) malicious thinking which wishes others harm, and (10) mistaken beliefs or wrong views, for the deeds of one's mind.

The ten virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind arise naturally when one refrains from the ten types of negative deeds. Hence we can see that embracing virtuous discipline is also another basis for the taking of refuge. In this approach, whatever actions you do, they are all offerings and service to the Buddhas.

Now that we have discussed some of the trainings that are the basis for taking refuge, what are the objects in whom we take refuge? They are the three jewels. The first jewel is the Buddha, who possesses the three kayas, or the enlightened body, speech, and mind.

The Buddha is said to possess three kayas or 'bodies' of enlightenment. The Buddha's Dharmakaya is like the vastness of the sky or space. The Buddha's Sambhogakaya manifests without Buddha ever straying from Dharmakaya-it is like the moon in the sky. The Buddha's appearance as the Nirmanakaya of flesh and blood is like the moon reflected in a pool of water.

The second jewel is the Dharma. This is the tripitaka, the three baskets of scriptures. We take refuge in the Dharma because the realization that arises in the minds of practitioners is based on the understanding of the scriptures. The third jewel is the Sangha, the enlightened community, the Arhats, Bodhisattvas, and Deities.

One who has taken refuge is surely and steadily following the path that leads to enlightenment. We take refuge for all sentient beings. This brings our refuge to the level of the Mahayana or great vehicle, which wishes to save every living being.

Buddhahood, enlightenment, is attained through the realization of selflessness, which includes the realization of the emptiness of all phenomena. Training step-by-step and accumulating merit helps us to be able to realize emptiness.

For this, one needs to cultivate the firm resolution to attain the state of enlightenment. It is also necessary to generate the precious bodhichitta. In order to be able to generate bodhichitta, it is necessary to cherish the welfare of others. It is often said in the teachings that all suffering originates from selfishness, while all happiness comes from valuing and seeking the welfare of others. This cherishing of the welfare of others can then lead to bodhichitta, the altruistic motivation to free all beings from suffering and establish them in the state of enlightenment.

It is further said that all of the teachings of the Buddha can be understood in terms of the law of karma, the law of cause and effect. If you sow seeds of virtue, this will bear the fruit of fortunate results and positive circumstances. If you cultivate non-virtuous behavior, it will lead to unhappiness.

In Buddhism, we speak of the importance of the law of cause and effect. In Christianity, the emphasis is on faith in a god. But this faith is itself is still a cause, a virtuous cause, so happiness can indeed be derived as the effect or result of a cause, which is cultivating faith. So, in fact, the Christians are also speaking of the law of cause and effect. These two religious teachings may use different concepts and yet share some very similar ideas.

When one receives empowerment and does the practice of Green Tara, she should be seen with the faith that she is the embodiment of all the enlightened activities of all the Buddhas. Thus one may learn to pray to the Bodhisattva Goddess Tara. Beyond any doubt she is able to allay and pacify all fears.

Both Tara and the female Buddha Vajrayogini are one in essence, since both are wisdom goddesses, enlightened ones. Even if one is not able to practice all the details of the eleven yogas of Vajrayogini, one who knows how to really pray deeply to the goddess Tara will receive the same benefits.

goddess Tara will receive the same benefits.

Often together with refuge and generating the wish to save all beings one also recites the seven-branch prayer, which is found near the beginning of many sadhanas. The seven branches are: paying homage, making confession, rejoicing in the virtues of others, resolving the bodhichitta enlightenment thought, requesting to turn the wheel of dharma, requesting not to pass into nirvana, and dedication of merit. Each of these branches reveals an important component of the path.

Having taken refuge and paid homage, one sees Tara as the sole object of refuge to whom you entrust your faith. This is the first of the four powers of confession, which is the second branch. The first power of confession is the 'power of the shrine'. Now one is ready to confess misdeeds with strong remorse, like one who has mistakenly taken poison and so has genuine regrets. You see how harmful it is to have committed such misdeeds, and, with remorse and contrition, you confess. This is the second of the powers of confession, the 'power of regret'

The third power of confession is the 'power of the antidote'; in short, this means promising with sincerity never to repeat the negative conduct again. As a result of this, all negativities will be fully repaired and virtue will be restored and revived. This is the fourth of the powers, the 'power of renewal or restoration'. Unless we confess negative deeds, we keep on continuously accumulating the causes of suffering.

An example of the third of the seven branches, the branch of rejoicing in virtue, is illustrated by the story of a beggar who rejoiced in the merit of a king presenting a lavish feast for the Buddha. By his rejoicing, the beggar gained even greater merit than the king himself. Similarly, if you know of someone who has completed the recitation of many millions of mantras, then if you rejoice in their practice, you are able to share in their great merit.

This illustrates that even without great effort on one's own part, through rejoicing in the merit of others, one is able to gain vast stores of merit.

Another of the seven branches is the request to the Buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma. Without such requests, the teachings do not reach sentient beings. This is illustrated in the life of Shakyamuni Buddha.

When Buddha became enlightened, he made a famous statement that is recorded in the sutras:

"I have found a Dharma which is like nectar; it is uncompounded clear light, profound and peaceful, beyond conceptual elaboration. Were I to explain it, others would not understand, and so I shall remain in the forest without speaking."

In response to this, the god Brahma, the creator, requested that Buddha turn the wheel of Dharma according to the particular needs of the varieties of sentient beings.

The final of the seven branches is dedication of merit. Dedication of merit is the most important of all of the seven branches. Whatever meditation, whatever practice or virtuous deeds one performs, we should always dedicate the merit so that our virtue is not dissipated.

Unless you dedicate the merit, however great it may be, it will not be of much benefit compared to merit which has been dedicated, and the result of our actions may even lead somewhere else! On the other hand, however small a virtue or meritorious deed one may have performed, by dedicating its merit, the benefits will go on increasing and increasing.

For example, however small an act of generosity, such as just giving a drink of water to a thirsty person, if followed by dedication of merit, it will go on increasing one's store of virtue. Without dedication, even the virtue gained through great deeds is easily exhausted.

The Buddhist scriptures teach that so much as a moment of anger can destroy great stores of undedicated virtue. Anger is the most destructive of the afflictive emotions. We dedicate whatever merit we generate immediately so that it cannot be destroyed by our negative thoughts, words, and deeds.

It is taught that patience serves as the antidote to anger. The virtue accrued through the practice of patience is immense. Whatever abusive words may be spoken to you, simply practice patience.

Since this is so important, let us pause here to consider the virtues of practicing patience. Patience is counted as one of the six or ten paramitas, the perfections of the Bodhisattvas. There are three types of patience. The best of the three is to know the emptiness of all things. Next best is non-retaliatory patience, where one does not retaliate or take revenge on others who have abused or behaved badly toward oneself. This means that one voluntarily accepts whatever suffering or harm may be heaped upon oneself without striking back.

Practicing patience is one of the highest forms of asceticism. Through this practice, all aggression will be pacified by itself. When two communities are in conflict, if one of these is able to exercise patience, the strife between them can diminish and gradually subside all together.

Patience is sometimes thought of as the highest of all virtues; it is very sacred. If one has practiced patience, it leads directly to being born with a beautiful form. Though we think being born beautiful is due to some kind of heredity from our parents, in fact it is largely due to the merit of practicing patience in one's previous lives.

Indeed, the good fortune of being born as a human being is due to the performance of ethics, of moral deeds, in one's previous lives. But not all humans are born with a beautiful form; it is only those who have practiced patience who are graced with such an appearance.

Those who are patient are generally admired by everyone; from kings and dignitaries down to the most ordinary person, all will respect one who is patient. This is because patience consumes one's anger, the cause of the worst suffering. There is no non-virtue like that of anger and hatred; it destroys all seeds of virtue. In contrast, practicing patience destroys anger and hatred. There really is no virtue that can match the virtue of patience.

Another of the six or ten paramitas or perfections of the Bodhisattvas is the perfection of diligence. Whatever you undertake, you must apply diligence to the task. If you have diligence, you can even make a hole in a rock using your hands. The practice of diligence in this life will enable one to do things quickly and successfully in future lives, without facing many obstacles.

Yet another of the paramitas or perfections is the perfection of concentration. The benefits of the training in concentration are that one becomes contented and peaceful and easy-going. One finds one's mind easy to tame, and things are fine and as they should be. These are some of the virtues of the positive karma that arises through the perfection of concentration.

Especially important is the prajna paramita, the perfection of wisdom. It gives one the ability to discern matters with mental clarity and clear reasoning.

The law of karma, of cause and effect, is infallible; it will never let you down. Non-virtues definitely do create unhappiness. Even if one has the good fortune to be born as a human being, if non-virtuous causes are present in oneself, these will perpetually create suffering, even if one gains higher rebirth, such as that of a human being.

The realms of suffering such as the hells are the result of one's own wrong thoughts and deeds. There are no 'places' such as the hells. The hellish fires of the hot hells are the manifestation of unresolved anger and negativity stored in the mind. These karmic accumulations manifest as what appears to be a real world or realm that one must experience. Due to negative karma, one has a distorted perception of all of reality, not

realizing that whatever reality one seems to be experiencing is in fact created by one's own mind.

All meditation practices must be structured according to the three excellences: that which is virtuous in the beginning, that which is virtuous in the middle, and that which is virtuous in the end.

In meditation, the most important thing is meditation on emptiness. All the attainments of the Buddhas are the result of meditation on emptiness. We ourselves have not become Buddhas because we have not effectively meditated on emptiness.

What is virtuous in the beginning is refuge. What is virtuous in the middle is the main part of the practice. What is virtuous in the end is the dedication of merit. Hence we can see that the taking of refuge is the basis of all further practice.

In the Earlier Translation school they speak of nine vehicles of Buddhism, which includes six tantric vehicles, while in the Later Translation schools they speak of four vehicles or classes of tantra: kriya or action tantra; charya or performance tantra; yoga tantra; and anuttarayogatantra or unsurpassable yoga tantra.

In the practice of Kriyatantra, one visualizes the deity, such as the goddess Tara, in the space above and in front, and thinks of oneself as a loyal subject supplicating a king or queen, hoping to receive their kindness. This is the nature of the relationship of the meditator and the deity in Kriyatantra. In Charyatantra, you would regard the goddess as a friend, one who you ask for some favor or assistance or blessings. In Charya or performance tantra, the relationship between the meditator and the deity is like that of a friend to a friend.

In Yogatantra, one is unifying one's own nature with the nature of the deity, unifying one's own appearance with the appearance of Tara. In Anuttarayogatantra, one does not view oneself and the deity as separate in nature. Based on this, one transforms one's ordinary body, speech, and mind into holy Tara's body, speech, and mind.

In order to do this, you must have received the permission-initiation. This is what enables you to transform your ordinary body into the divine body, to transform your ordinary speech into enlightened speech, and to transform your mundane thoughts into the wisdom of the goddess Tara through meditating on emptiness.

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Special Benefits Bestowed by Tara And the Mother Goddesses

The practice of Tara is said to have many different extraordinary powers of blessing, and is particularly effective in a wide variety of situations. For example, it is said that at the end of an aeon or cycle of time, when hardships and calamities may increase,

the mantra and puja rituals of Tara are very essential. Anyone can recite the prayers of Tara and it brings great benefit.

As we recounted earlier, in a prior era at the beginning of our aeon, the Buddha Mahavairochana was the Guru, the spiritual guide, of Tara. Buddha Vairochana blessed Tara and prophesied to her that at the end of the aeon, in those lands and worlds where pujas, prayers, and rituals of Tara are recited, as a result of these prayers, the many diseases, troubles, and disturbances caused by evil spirits and by human beings would be pacified and resolved. I feel that the practice of Tara is the most important and essential of all practices in such times.

Other goddesses also very helpful in this regard is Marichi, or Ozer Jemma, and the well-known goddess of spiritual healing, Parna Shawari. Their prayers and mantras bring the same power and benefits as those of Tara. They are basically the same goddess, Prajnaparamita, in different manifestations.

Of Tara, it is said that not only diseases and disturbances caused by evil spirits, but also fighting, wars, conflicts and arguments may also be pacified and resolved by the power of her practice. All such obstacles and related difficulties can be removed through the blessing of the prayers and mantras of these goddesses.

Ozer Jemma and Parna Shawari as well as Yudon Drolma, are particularly effective forms of the goddess to practice in order to protect against and heal all kinds of diseases. They are especially important to protect against thieves and criminals, and to heal the suffering caused by strife and conflict.

It is said that these puja prayer rituals and mantra recitations are particularly important when we come to the end of an age or cycle of time. For such times, the practice of Guru Rinpoche is widely recommended, but Tara, Ozer Jemma, and Parna Shawari are also extremely important.

In times of the threat of wars, epidemics, strife, and so on, it is very important that the mantras of these three goddesses be put on prayer flags and hung in the air, as much as people are able to do this. People from all walks of life should do this and say these mantras as much as possible. Along with the prayers of Guru Rinpoche, these practices are the most effective in such times and situations as we are speaking of. This has been stated in many scriptures.

One who offers praise to Tara is truly intelligent. Whether early in the morning or late at night, if one offers the praise to the twenty-one Taras, such as offering two, three, and then seven repetitions of the prayer, totaling twelve recitations of the praise to the twenty-one Taras, all wishes can be fulfilled. This is how it is in the Four Mandalas' Ritual of Holy Tara "The Illuminating Lamp". In this puja one repeats the praise twice, then three times, then seven times.

When it is said that all one's wishes will be fulfilled, it means that if you need a child, you'll get one. If you have financial needs, these will be met. Whatever wishes you have, all of them can be fulfilled through praise to Tara. Actually, one doesn't need more than this practice; it accomplishes everything!

You only need to try it out, to test it, in order to allay your obstacles. All of your obstacles and difficulties, however many there are, can all be removed and relieved through offering praise to Tara. Through praying to Tara, all potential obstacles are powerless to cause you harm; they are naturally pacified. Nothing can get to you or harm you in any way; you become impenetrable, unassailable.

There is no doubt that Tara is very swift in allaying obstacles. It is an especially close and rapid method for female practitioners. Tara and the female Buddha Vajrayogini are of the same essence; Vajrayogini is also a rapid method of gaining accomplishment. All the activities of the Buddhas are embodied in Tara, contained in her, complete in her.

You have now been empowered to meditate on yourself in the form of Green Tara. Your speech can be transformed into mantra, your thoughts into wisdom. You are no longer an ordinary being; your body, speech, and mind have been completely elevated into the exalted state of Tara herself, into the form, mantra, and wisdom of Tara.

The words of the praise to the twenty-one Taras are not the intellectual composition of scholars. They are spoken directly by Buddha Mahavairochana and Buddha Shakyamuni themselves. Please recite the praise to Tara as much as you are able to in the course of your everyday life. If you are unable at any time to recite the praise, try to recite the mantra of Tara, OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SVAHA.

At the minimum, at least you can recite "Tara, Tara, Tara iK", or you can say "Tare, Tare, Tare iK", just repeating her name. When you call out someone's name, don't they give you their attention? By calling on Tara by name, she will certainly hear you and respond. Don't just do it because I say so, but by all means, do it!

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