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བསྟན་པ།

**A Brief Explanation of the
Practice and System of the
Thirty-Seven Heap Maṇḍala Offering**

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KHYENTSE VISION
PROJECT

maN+Dal so bdun ma'i lag len dang rnam gzbag cung zad bstan pa

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

The practice of generosity is one of the first teachings the Buddha gave for general listeners and an essential practice on the path to liberation. Generosity is the first *pāramitā*, or transcendental virtue, that a bodhisattva should train in. Of the many forms of generosity, this text is concerned with material generosity, which encompasses giving one's own wealth and also offerings such as Mount Meru that are owned by no one. One method, as taught in scriptures such as the *Gubhyasamāja Tantra*, is to practice offering visualized worlds filled with every possible desirable object:

The wise should fill this realm
With seven types of precious substances.
Intelligent ones should make such offerings daily
For accomplishments, since accomplishments are what one wishes.¹

In his instruction manual on the maṇḍala offering in thirty-seven heaps,² the Drikung master Ngedön Dzamling Chödrak Gyatso³ describes different systems of maṇḍala offering from India and Tibet. Indian masters such as Buddhaguhya, Mañjuśrīkīrti, and others taught maṇḍala offerings in twenty-three heaps, whereas the instructions of the mahāsiddha Jetari only mention seven. He also explains that texts such as the *Kālacakra Tantra* propose a maṇḍala offering in twenty-five heaps, while other texts speak of eleven and fifteen.

This text by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo is based on the maṇḍala offering liturgy in thirty-seven heaps, originally composed by Drogön Chögyal Pagpa (1235–1280), one of the founding figures of the Sakya tradition. Chögyal Pagpa added fourteen heaps to the already existing twenty-three heap maṇḍala practice, thus bringing the number to thirty-seven. His fourteen additions are the precious mountain, the wish-fulfilling tree, the wish-granting cow, the uncultivated harvest, the eight offering goddesses, the parasol, and the victory banner. This form of the practice later spread to all traditions

of Tibetan Buddhism, becoming an integral part of the preliminary practices (*ngöndro*), which prepare the ground for intensive Vajrayāna practice.

So that it may be used by practitioners of all lineages, the text does not name a specific “field of merit” to whom the offering is made. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo simply offers brief instructions on how to handle the maṇḍala plate used for the practice, as well as guidelines for the visualization of each of the thirty-seven parts of the maṇḍala, including a discussion of its geographical arrangement. These instructions are particularly useful for anyone who wishes to gain a clear understanding of this practice in a concise manner without having to consult elaborate scriptures such as Vasubandhu’s *Treasury of Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakośa*).

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A Brief Explanation of the Maṇḍala Offering

Prostration to the guru.

The practice of the maṇḍala is as follows. In the beginning, in front of a visualized field of merit, carefully wipe the maṇḍala plate to symbolize that the nature of mind is stainless.

After that, hold the maṇḍala plate in the left hand, together with some flowers. With your right hand, hold a flower between the thumb and index finger, extend the rest of the fingers and moisten them with saffron water and the five substances.⁴ Apply this to the maṇḍala, drawing a circle along the edge in a counterclockwise manner.

Alternatively, after sprinkling the maṇḍala with perfumed water to symbolize never parting from the moisture of compassion and bodhicitta, draw a circle along the circumference of the plate with the ring finger, forming the external boundary. Recite OM VAJRA BHŪMI ĀḤ HŪṂ. With that recitation, think that a vast and great sphere, made of the elements stacked on top of one another, combined with the mighty golden ground, instantaneously appears on top of the maṇḍala.

Saying OM VAJRA REKHE ĀḤ HŪṂ, visualize a circular boundary of iron mountains. Without lifting your hand from the maṇḍala, place the flower held in the right hand in the center with the recitation of HŪṂ to remove obstacles.

Place a large heap upon that same place and visualize Mount Sumeru in the middle of the great ocean. Its eastern side is made of crystal, its southern side of lapis lazuli, its western side of ruby, and its northern side of gold.

Place a heap in the east for Pūrvavideha, which is semicircular and made of crystal. Place a heap in the south [128] for Jambudvīpa, which is in the shape of an axe-head and made of lapis lazuli. In the same way, visualize the others with the placing of each heap:

in the west is Aparagodānīya, which is circular in shape and made of ruby, and in the north Uttarakuru, which is square and made of gold. All these continents are facing away from the center.

The eastern continent has Deha to its right and Videha to its left. The southern continent has Cāmara to its right and Aparacāmara to its left. The western continent has Śāṭhā to its right and Uttaramantriṇa to its left. The northern continent has Kurava to its right and Kaurava to its left. All these subcontinents resemble their main continents in shape and material.

On the eastern continent is the precious mountain, made of various precious substances. Its width and height are immeasurable. On the southern continent is the wish-granting tree, its trunk made of seven precious materials. It has perfect roots, trunk, branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits. It provides everything that one desires. On the western continent is the wish-granting cow, reddish gold in color. It has a perfect form, beautiful to behold. It provides desirable objects without effort. On the northern continent there is the uncultivated harvest, perfect in taste and nourishment.

In front of the precious mountain is the thousand-spoked wheel, made from the gold found in the Jambu river. It shines as brightly as two suns. Although it is pulled [129] by no one, it can miraculously travel one hundred thousand yojanas in a day. Through its power, one can easily bring the four kinds of army through the sky to the four continents and the Realm of the Thirty-Three.

In front of the wish-granting tree is the precious jewel, an eight-sided lapis lazuli. Its light reaches an area of one hundred yojanas, making the region as bright as day even during the night. It is soothing when one is tormented by heat and warm when one is too cold. Wherever the jewel remains, it removes all sickness and untimely demise. It can fulfill almost everything one can wish for.

In front of the wish-granting cow is the precious queen. She is free of the five faults and endowed with the eight qualities.⁵ One never tires of seeing her. She spreads sweet fragrance, her mere touch is capable of giving supreme joy, and she has mastered the sixty-four arts of desire. In whichever continent she lives, she removes hunger, thirst, and sadness.

In front of the uncultivated harvest is the precious minister, who understands and accomplishes whatever the ruler of the land wishes without being told. With a perfect physique, [130] being strong and skilled, he is expert in making the troops advance, hold their position, and retreat. He is ornamented with silk and jewels.

In the southeastern direction, between Aparacāmara and Deha, is the precious elephant, ash white in color with six tusks. The crown of its head is red and high, and its face is covered with a net of precious jewels. It has the strength of one thousand ordinary elephants and does no harm to others without reason. It walks slowly and peacefully. It brings victory in all battles.

In the southwestern direction, between Cāmara and Uttaramantriṇa is the precious supreme horse. It has a blue coat, beautiful like the feathers on a peacock's throat. It is magnificent, with excellent health and sturdy limbs. When commanded, it has such strength of speed that it can course around Jambudvīpa three times in one day.

In the northwestern direction, between Śāṭhā and Kurava is the precious general. He is strong and skilled in warfare. He is dressed in metal armor and magnificent in appearance. Alternatively, one can visualize a precious householder who delights all people. He is trustworthy, [131] without any deceit, and has an inexhaustible treasury, filled with substances such as precious vajras, sapphires, emeralds, gold, silver, white coral, and so on. It is taught that one can visualize either of these two.

In the northeastern direction, between Kaurava and Videha are the excellent treasure-vases that fulfill all desires effortlessly.

Some say that the continents are oriented toward the center, with the subcontinents situated on the right and left of them respectively. In that case, the southern subcontinent Cāmara would have to be in the southeast. That would mean that the subcontinent of the rākṣasas would be in the southeastern direction, so the rākṣasa who is one of the protectors of the ten directions would also have to come from there, which contradicts the way it is generally explained in Dharma texts. Many sources mention this, and in particular the *Ocean of Sindhu*⁶ states:

The subcontinent Cāmara in the southwestern direction is the land of rākṣasas.

The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* is also known to have been taught on this continent. Aparacāmara was the name given to the other subcontinent when the son of a rākṣasa king was banished there. Considering the continents to be oriented away from the center, the sūtra teaches that the direction in front of each of the continents is south, to their right is west, behind them is north, and to their left is east. Sumeru, the king of mountains, is in the center, situated to the north of all four continents. This is also how it is taught in the Abhidharma.

In front of the precious wheel is the goddess of seductive grace, assuming an elegant pose. Beautiful to behold, she displays the exceptionally graceful expressions of her youth. In front of the precious jewel [132] is the goddess of garlands, holding a garland in her hands. In front of the precious queen is the goddess of song, singing a melodious song. In front of the precious minister is the goddess of dance, dancing playfully. In front of the precious elephant, in the southeastern direction, is the goddess of flowers, holding flowers. In front of the precious supreme horse, in the southwestern direction, is the goddess of incense, holding incense. In front of the precious general, in the northwestern direction, is the goddess of lights, holding a butter lamp. In front of the great treasure vase, in the northeastern direction, is the goddess of scented water, holding scented water.

In the sky, in front of the goddess of grace, is the sun. Its sphere is made of fire crystal. In the sky, in front of the goddess of song, is the moon. Its sphere is made of water crystal. In front of the goddess of dance is the precious parasol, white in color with a golden handle. In the sky, in front of the goddess of garlands, is the banner of universal victory.

The space in between these objects, and in the midst of them, is piled all the perfect wealth of gods and humans.

This was written by Mañjughoṣa. Sarvadā kalyāṇaṃ bhavatu.

NOTES

1. As quoted by Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen (1182–1251) in his text *The Rituals of Outer, Inner, and Secret Maṇḍala Offering* (*phyi nang gsang gsum gyi maN+Dal 'bul chog bzugs*). In *Collected Works of the Founding Masters of Sakya* (*dpal ldan sa skya pa'i bka' 'bum*), vol. 12, 31–32 (235–38). Derge, 1736.
2. *The Perfect Vase of Two Accumulations: Naked Instructions on Maṇḍala Offering in Thirty-Seven Heaps* (*'phags pa'i maN+Dal so bdun ma'i dmar khrid tshogs gnyis bum bzang*).
3. nges don 'dzam gling chos grags rgya mtsho, a Drikung Kagyu master (1859–?).
4. Literally, “coming from a cow” (*ba byung*). According to tradition this refers to an assemblage of five substances coming from a cow: dung, urine, butter, curd, and milk, which are gathered according to a strict protocol. The resulting substance can be added in a minute symbolic quantity to the saffron water.
5. Details of the qualities of the precious queen, or precious lady, followed by a description of the other treasures of the universal monarch, can be found in *The Application of Mindfulness of the Sacred Dharma* (*Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna*), f. 100b. Translated by the Dharmachakra Translation Committee. 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha. See 84000.
6. “The One About the Ocean of Sindhu,” the fifth of the *Seven Chapters*, an often-recited series of prayers discovered by the fourteenth-century tertön Zangpo Dragpa. It was revealed by Padmasambhava at the request of his disciple Dorje Dudjom. The quote is the first line of the prayer and its familiar name used by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo here refers to the second line.

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- Zangpo Dragpa (bzang po grags pa) and Rigzin Gödem (rig 'dzin rgod ldem). *Chapter Five: The Prayer Requested by Nanam Dorjé Dudjom*. In *The Prayer in Seven Chapters* (Le'u bdun ma). <https://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/tulku-zangpo-drakpa/leu-dunma-chapter-5>.

GLOSSARY

Aparacāmara

ར་ཡབ་གཞན། • *nga yab gzhan*

“Another Tail Fan,” a subcontinent to the left of Jambudvīpa.

Aparagodānīya

ནུབ་བ་ལང་སྟོད། • *nub ba lang spyod*

“Northern Land of Using Cattle,” a continent to the west of Sumeru, where the inhabitants get everything they need from wish-granting cows.

Cāmara

ར་ཡབ། • *nga yab*

“Tail Fan,” a subcontinent to the right of Jambudvīpa.

Deha

ལུས། • *lus*

“Body,” a subcontinent to the right of Pūrvavideha.

Jambu river

འཛམ་བུ་ཆུ་བོ། • *'dzam bu chu bo* • jambunadī

Legendary river into which the fruits of the Jambu tree fall. Its banks are said to be full of gold.

Jambudvīpa

འཛམ་བུ་རྒྱིང་། • *'dzam bu'i gling*

“The Jambu Continent,” a continent to the south of Sumeru. Jambudvīpa is the southernmost of the four continents, and it is the world in which we reside.

Kaurava

སྒྲ་མི་སྒྲན་གྱི་ཁྲ། • *sgra mi snyan kyī zla*

“Companion of Unpleasant Sound,” a subcontinent to the left of Uttarakuru.

Kurava

སྒྲ་མི་སྒྲན། • *sgra mi snyan*

“Unpleasant Sound,” a subcontinent to the right of Uttarakuru.

Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra

ལང་ཀར་གསེགས་པའི་མདོ། • *lang kar gshegs pa'i mdo*

An important and influential Mahāyāna text, which discusses many key topics, such as emptiness, buddha nature, and luminosity. It also recommends vegetarianism.

Mount Sumeru

རི་རབ། • *ri rab*

The great mountain said to be in the center of our world system.

Pūrvavideha

ཤར་ལུས་འཕགས་པོ། • *shar lus 'phags po*

“Eastern Majestic Body,” a continent to the east of Sumeru, where humans who are “sublime in physique” reside.

Realm of the Thirty-Three

སུམ་ཅུ་རྩ་གསུམ། • *sum cu rtsa gsum* • trāyastriṃśa

A superior god realm of the World of Desire (Kāmaloka), traditionally situated above Mount Sumeru.

Sāthā

གཡོ་ལྔ། • *g.yo ldan*

“With Movement,” or “Deceitful,” a subcontinent to the right of Aparagodānīya.

Uttarakuru

བྱང་སྒྲ་མི་སྒྲན། • *byang sgra mi snyan*

“Northern Land of Unpleasant Sound,” a continent to the north of Sumeru, where the inhabitants hear an unpleasant sound when they are about to die.

Uttaramantriṇa

ལམ་མཚོག་འགོ། • *lam mchog 'gro*

“Treading the Supreme Path,” a subcontinent to the left of Aparagodānīya.

Videha

ལུས་འཕགས་པོ། • *lus 'phags*

“Majestic Body,” a subcontinent to the left of Pūrvavideha.

yojana

དཔག་ཚད། • *dpag tshad*

A measurement of distance in ancient India, roughly 8–10 km.