Vajrasattva Meditation and the Four Opponent Powers
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1. Bodhicitta: loved, guided and responsible

- Begin by becoming present
  - Settle the body
  - Follow the breath
  - Let the mind arrive in the present rather than remaining in past and future
- Remember that we are not spiritually abandoned
  - Buddhas and bodhisattvas care continuously for sentient beings
  - Spiritual teachers embody and communicate this care
  - Remembering their compassion counters loneliness and the belief that nobody cares
  - Their guidance is reliable because it is directed towards both temporary and ultimate welfare
- Let their example determine how we live
  - Make a firm decision to use this life beneficially
  - Dedicate actions, resources and even each breath to sentient beings
  - Move from seeking care only for oneself to becoming a source of care for others
- Bodhicitta gives the whole practice its direction
  - Wish to free numberless beings from suffering and its causes
  - Recognise that only a buddha can benefit them completely
  - Therefore aspire to enlightenment oneself
  - Purification is undertaken to remove obstacles to serving others, not merely to feel personally clean

2. What must be purified: samsara and its causes

- **The three kinds of suffering**
  - **Suffering of pain**
    - Obvious physical pain, illness, grief and emotional distress
    - The form of suffering most easily recognised
  - **Suffering of change**
    - Pleasure depends on conditions and changes when those conditions change
    - The ordinary mind mistakes temporary pleasure, relief or stimulation for genuine happiness
    - Health becomes illness; youth becomes ageing; possessions separate from us
    - What first pleases us may later bore, exhaust or hurt us
  - **Pervasive conditioned suffering**
    - The body and mind are produced and governed by karma and delusion
    - This condition makes every ordinary life vulnerable to pain and change
    - It is present even when no obvious pain is being experienced
  - Dissolution is already occurring
    - It does not begin only at the moment of death
    - Hormonal change, weakened senses, memory loss and ageing reveal the process
    - The change towards death begins shortly after birth
  - Renunciation is an intelligent response
    - Not rejection of life, the body or pleasant experiences
    - It abandons the grasping that demands permanence from changing things
    - It seeks freedom from the pervasive condition that repeatedly produces suffering
  - Purification follows the pattern of the **four noble truths**
    - Understand the full extent of suffering
    - Identify and abandon karma, ignorance and delusion as its causes
    - Recognise that cessation is possible
    - Practise the path and its antidotes

3. Karma: why purification cannot be postponed

- **Karma means intentional action of body, speech and mind**
  - Motivation determines the ethical character and direction of an action
  - Non-virtue becomes a cause of suffering
  - Ordinary virtue becomes a cause of favourable samsaric experience
  - Virtue joined with renunciation, bodhicitta and wisdom becomes part of the path to liberation and enlightenment
- **Four fundamental characteristics**
  - **1. Karma produces a corresponding result**
    - Actions leave potentials in the mental continuum
    - Harmful causes cannot naturally produce happiness
    - Wholesome causes naturally support happiness
  - **2. Karma increases**
    - A small imprint can grow into a powerful result
    - Small harmful actions should never be dismissed
    - Small acts of compassion and virtue are also immensely worthwhile
    - Do not postpone virtue while waiting to do something grand
  - **3. A result requires a previously created cause**
    - Unexpected experiences are not causeless
    - We may not remember the action that produced them
    - Ripening may occur moments, years, lifetimes or eons later
  - **4. Karma does not simply disappear**
    - Time and forgetfulness do not erase it
    - It remains until it ripens or meets an effective antidote
    - This makes purification both possible and urgent
- Atisha's example of vigilance
  - Carried a small stupa representing his guru
  - Purified breaches of refuge, monastic, bodhisattva and tantric commitments as soon as he noticed them
  - Even while travelling, purified possible accidental harm to insects
  - **Lesson:** recognise, oppose and purify harm promptly rather than normalising it

4. The four opponent powers: the structure of purification

- **1. Regret - recognise the poison**
  - See the action honestly as harmful
  - Understand that it carries the potential for suffering
  - Generate urgency like someone who discovers they have swallowed poison
  - Do not confuse regret with guilt
    - Regret says: I did something harmful and can respond wisely
    - Guilt says: I am permanently bad
    - Self-hatred adds another affliction and obstructs confident practice
- **2. Reliance - restore relationship and direction**
  - Reliance upon the **Three Jewels**
    - **Buddha** as awakened guide
    - **Dharma** as the realised path and actual protection
    - **Sangha** as those who realise and embody the path
  - Reliance upon Vajrasattva and the spiritual teacher
  - Reliance upon one's own capacity for wisdom, compassion and change
  - Generate compassion for the beings harmed or placed at risk by one's actions
  - Even without formal refuge, remember a person or example that inspires virtue and restraint
- **3. Remedy - actively oppose the imprint**
  - Vajrasattva visualisation and mantra recitation
  - Hundred-syllable mantra or the short mantra:
    Om Vajrasattva Hum
  - Other remedies can include apology, forgiveness, compassion, study, offerings and beneficial action
  - A remedy is not merely wishing the karma away; it creates contrary causes and changes the mind
- **4. Restraint - change future conduct**
  - Make a sincere determination not to repeat the action
  - Permanent restraint where this is genuinely possible
  - When it is difficult, promise restraint for a day, an hour or a few minutes
  - An honest limited promise kept is stronger than an unrealistic lifelong promise immediately broken
  - Restraint converts purification from looking backwards into a new direction for life
- All four powers are needed
  - Regret without confidence can become guilt
  - Reliance without remedy remains passive
  - Remedy without restraint leaves the behavioural cause unchanged
  - Together they weaken the old continuum and establish a new one

5. How purification changes karmic results

- **Indefinite karma**
  - Not all conditions for a fixed manner of ripening are complete
  - The four opponent powers can purify it from the root
  - The suffering result may be prevented entirely
- **Definite karma**
  - Some experience of the result must occur
  - Purification can still reduce its duration and intensity
  - Very prolonged suffering may ripen as a short illness, headache or difficulty
- No contradiction between karmic certainty and purification
  - Karma is definite when all relevant causes and conditions are complete
  - Purification introduces powerful opposing conditions
  - It may remove the result or transform how the result is experienced

6. Positive karma, merit and the danger of anger

- Karmic increase works for virtue as well as non-virtue
  - A brief moment of genuine compassion creates powerful merit
  - Bodhicitta connects one's intention with numberless sentient beings
  - A good intention remains meaningful even when unnoticed or unappreciated
- One person's conduct changes the shared world
  - Refraining from killing removes one source of violence
  - Refraining from lying removes one source of deception
  - Ethical conduct is therefore a universal contribution, not merely private morality
- Merit is the real cause of happiness
  - Money, education and possessions are conditions, not the fundamental cause
  - Meeting Dharma and valuing compassion indicate merit accumulated previously
  - Geshe-la compares this accumulated merit to a vast bank balance
  - Modern life may leave little time to replenish it through concentrated practice
- Anger is the great threat to merit
  - Shantideva warns that intense anger can destroy vast accumulations of merit
  - Like holding a burning coal to throw at someone: you are burned first
  - Anger immediately destroys one's own peace
  - Impatience is a subtle form of anger
  - It disturbs the body, family and surrounding people
  - Mindfulness means noticing it early, restraining action and purifying promptly

7. Vajrasattva practice: refuge, form and meaning

- **Renew refuge**
  - Not a temporary request for rescue
  - A commitment to rely on awakened guidance until enlightenment
- **Renew bodhicitta**
  - Purify what prevents complete benefit to others
  - Use the practice as a cause of enlightenment, not merely worldly relief
- Meaning of Vajrasattva
  - Embodiment of the purified enlightened mind of all buddhas
  - Name suggests indestructible being or indestructible mind
  - Inseparable from the guru and the enlightened mind
  - Appears externally so that we can recognise and purify our own clear-light nature
- Visualised form
  - Seated above the crown on a white lotus and moon disc
  - White body, one face and two arms
  - Right hand holds a vajra at the heart
  - Left hand holds a bell at the thigh
  - At the heart is a moon disc with HUM
  - HUM is encircled by the hundred-syllable mantra or represented by brilliant white light

8. Mantra and the three purification visualisations

- Mantra recitation
  - Hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra
  - Short mantra:
    Om Vajrasattva Hum
  - Common Tibetan pronunciation:
    Om Benza Satto Hung
  - Recitation is joined to regret, reliance, visualisation and confidence
- **1. Downward purification**
  - White light and nectar enter through the crown
  - They fill the body and wash impurities downward and out
  - Negativities may appear as smoke, soot, tar, dirty oil, insects or snakes
  - Can be used especially for sickness, harmful energies or obscurations
- **2. Upward purification**
  - Nectar fills the body from below
  - Impurities are pushed upwards and out through the crown
  - Like oil rising to the surface of water
- **3. Instantaneous purification**
  - Brilliant light radiates from Vajrasattva's heart
  - The moment it touches us, every obscuration disappears
  - Like darkness vanishing when a light is switched on
- Different ways of organising the three methods
  - Sickness, spirit harm and karmic obscurations
  - Obscurations of body, speech and mind
  - Gross, subtle and very subtle obscurations
  - The essential criterion is which method produces the strongest confidence

9. Confidence after purification

- Receive Vajrasattva's assurance
  - Negativities, obscurations and damaged pledges have been purified
  - Trust the enlightened mind more than the habitual deluded mind
- Do not recreate a negative identity
  - After applying the antidote, do not insist: I am bad; I am impure
  - That identity mistakes a temporary condition for the nature of the person
  - Repeated self-condemnation can become another form of grasping
- Confidence is grounded in dependent arising
  - Negative karma arose through causes and conditions
  - It is therefore not permanent or inherent
  - New causes and antidotes can change it
- Confidence is not carelessness
  - Continue purification as a daily practice
  - Maintain restraint and ethical vigilance
  - Move forward without remaining imprisoned in guilt

10. Self-compassion, transformation and genuine Dharma practice

- Compassion for all beings begins with oneself
  - Create the causes of one's own genuine happiness
  - Protect the mind from anger, jealousy, discouragement and low self-esteem
  - Work with oneself kindly rather than using Dharma as another weapon of criticism
- Distinguish real self-care from indulgence
  - Actions that increase selfishness, confusion, isolation or depression are not genuine care
  - Real self-care strengthens the capacity to benefit others
- Low self-esteem is not the self
  - The thought 'I am not good enough' is a temporary mental projection
  - It is not the person's true nature
  - Afflictions can be transformed because they are adventitious rather than essential
- Why personal transformation is altruistic
  - To free others from suffering, work with suffering's causes in oneself
  - To bring others happiness, understand and cultivate genuine happiness
  - The quality of one's help depends upon the quality of one's mind

11. Absorption, divine pride and the complete path

- Absorption
  - Vajrasattva melts into white light
  - The light descends through the crown to the heart
  - External Vajrasattva merges inseparably with the innate clear-light mind
  - Purity is recognised within rather than left as something remote and external
- Divine pride
  - Identify with enlightened potential rather than a fixed miserable identity
  - Not ordinary egoistic pride
  - Genuine divine pride produces humility, compassion and respect
  - If it produces judgement of others, ordinary pride has adopted spiritual language
- Tantra must transform the mind
  - Protects against impure appearance and conception
  - Initiations and ritual knowledge are meaningful only when they change the mind
  - Without renunciation, bodhicitta and emptiness, advanced practices can support ego
  - Increasing humility is the sign of genuine Dharma practice
- Two accumulations and the bodies of a buddha
  - Accumulation of method
    - Love, compassion, bodhicitta, generosity, ethics, patience, effort and concentration
    - Cause of the form bodies: sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya
  - Accumulation of wisdom
    - Realisation of selflessness and emptiness
    - Cause of the wisdom body: dharmakaya
  - The complete path joins method and wisdom, compassion and emptiness

12. Emptiness: the deepest reason purification works

- **The three spheres are empty of inherent existence**
  - **The person who purifies**
  - **The act of purification**
  - **The karma being purified**
- How they actually exist
  - Through causes and conditions
  - Through parts and relationships
  - Through a valid basis and mental designation
  - Conventionally real and functional, but not independent or self-established
- Avoid the two extremes
  - Not inherently fixed: therefore karma and identity can change
  - Not nonexistent: therefore actions, consequences and purification matter
- Emptiness makes transformation possible
  - If negativity were the permanent nature of mind, no antidote could remove it
  - Because stains are dependent and temporary, they can be opposed
  - The clear-light nature is not destroyed by adventitious obscurations
- The teaching's central movement
  - See suffering fully rather than mistaking samsaric change for happiness
  - Understand karma and accept responsibility without guilt
  - Apply regret, reliance, remedy and restraint promptly
  - Protect merit, cultivate compassion and restrain anger
  - Purify through Vajrasattva visualisation and mantra
  - Trust the purification and stop identifying with impurity
  - Recognise the mind's pure potential through divine pride
  - Unite method and wisdom on the path to enlightened body, speech and mind