

Vajrasattva Meditation and the Four Opponent Powers

Summary of Geshe Tenzin Zopa's morning and afternoon teachings · 23 August 2026

Geshe Tenzin Zopa's Sunday teaching presents Vajrasattva practice as a complete method for understanding karma, purifying harmful tendencies and recovering confidence in the mind's fundamentally pure nature. Purification is not based on guilt or self-condemnation. It is an intelligent and compassionate response to the recognition that actions have consequences and that their causes can be changed.

Remembering that we are loved and guided

Geshe-la begins by asking us to settle the body and mind through breathing and to become present. We then remember that the buddhas, bodhisattvas and spiritual teachers care continuously for all sentient beings, including us.

Many people suffer because they believe that nobody loves them, cares about them or can offer reliable guidance. Recognising the immeasurable compassion of enlightened beings counters this sense of isolation. Their example should inspire us to make a firm decision: to dedicate our own life, actions and even each breath to the temporary and ultimate happiness of sentient beings.

This is the beginning of bodhicitta: the aspiration to attain enlightenment so that we can benefit others completely.

Understanding samsaric happiness

Ordinary virtuous karma produces better results than non-virtuous karma, but it may still produce only temporary happiness within samsara. Geshe-la revisits the three kinds of suffering:

- **The suffering of pain:** readily recognisable physical and emotional suffering.
- **The suffering of change:** experiences that initially appear pleasurable but become unsatisfactory when they alter or end.
- **Pervasive conditioned suffering:** the underlying condition of a body and mind governed by karma and delusion.

The ordinary mind commonly mistakes the suffering of change for true happiness. Good health, long life, status, possessions and sensory enjoyment seem desirable, but none can be secured permanently. Good health changes into illness, youth changes into ageing, and life ends in death.

The dissolution of the elements does not begin only at death. Hormonal changes, ageing, failing senses and memory, and the gradual weakening of the body all reveal a process that begins shortly after birth.

Recognising this is not a rejection of life. Renunciation does not mean refusing pleasant experiences or abandoning the body. It means releasing the grasping that treats changing things as permanent and capable of providing lasting satisfaction.

The four noble truths as a pattern for purification

Purification follows the structure of the four noble truths:

1. Suffering must be understood.
2. Its causes must be abandoned.
3. Cessation must be attained.
4. The path must be practised.

We therefore need to identify precisely what is being purified. If we concentrate only on obvious pain, we may neglect the suffering of change and the pervasive condition of samsara itself.

Understanding pervasive suffering requires an understanding of karma, ignorance and the delusions: especially attachment, anger, jealousy, pride and self-centredness. Merely knowing that karma means "action" is not enough. We must recognise how motivation determines whether an action remains a cause of samsara or becomes part of the path to liberation.

Four fundamental characteristics of karma

Geshe-la explains four characteristics that make purification urgent.

Karma produces a corresponding result

Actions of body, speech and mind create potentials for future experience. Negative actions become causes of suffering, while virtuous actions become causes of happiness. Unless virtue is joined with renunciation, bodhicitta and wisdom, however, it may produce only favourable samsaric conditions rather than liberation.

Karma increases

A karmic imprint does not remain static. Its potential grows over time without further effort. This is why apparently small harmful actions should not be dismissed.

The same principle applies to virtue. Even a brief moment of compassion, generosity or bodhicitta creates powerful merit that continues to increase. We should not postpone virtue while waiting for an opportunity to perform something grand.

Results depend upon previously created causes

When an unexpected difficulty arises, we may ask why it is happening because we cannot remember creating its cause. But an action and its result need not occur close together. A result may ripen moments, years, lifetimes or even eons after its cause was created.

Karma does not simply disappear

Karma is not erased merely because time passes or we forget the original action. It remains until it ripens or is opposed by an effective antidote. Negative karma can be purified. Positive karma also remains and grows, although destructive states (particularly anger) can damage accumulated merit.

Atisha's example

The great Indian master Atisha carried a small stupa representing his guru. Whenever he noticed a transgression of his refuge, monastic, bodhisattva or tantric commitments, he would stop and purify it through the four opponent powers.

Even while travelling on horseback, he would purify if he thought that his journey might inadvertently have harmed insects. His example shows the importance of recognising and purifying harmful actions promptly, without dismissing them as insignificant.

The four opponent powers

The heart of Vajrasattva purification is the application of four opponent powers.

Regret

Regret means recognising a harmful action as harmful and understanding that it can produce suffering. It is not guilt, self-hatred or the belief that one is permanently bad.

Geshe-la compares it to discovering that one has swallowed poison. The appropriate response is not to sit in self-blame but to remove the poison quickly.

Reliance

Reliance means turning towards trustworthy guidance and restoring the relationship damaged by the harmful action.

We rely upon Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, Vajrasattva, our spiritual teachers and our own potential for wisdom and compassion. Reliance also includes compassion for sentient beings, because they are the objects whom our harmful actions affect.

More broadly, a person who has not formally taken refuge can remember anyone whose example inspires virtue and discourages harm.

The remedy

The remedy is the practical antidote. In Vajrasattva practice, it principally consists of mantra recitation and purification visualisation. Other remedies may include apologising, forgiving, generating compassion, reciting another mantra, studying Dharma, making offerings or performing beneficial actions.

Restraint

Restraint is the determination not to repeat the action. The commitment should be sincere and realistic. If an action can be abandoned permanently, promise not to repeat it. If that is presently too difficult, make the commitment for a day, an hour or even a few minutes. A modest promise honestly kept has greater value than an unrealistic lifelong promise immediately broken.

Definite and indefinite karma

Indefinite karma has not yet become completely fixed by all the conditions necessary for ripening. Through the four opponent powers, it can be purified from the root.

Definite karma must produce some experience, but purification can still greatly reduce its intensity and duration. A result that might otherwise involve very prolonged suffering may ripen as a brief illness, headache or other short-lived difficulty.

Thus, the statement that karma is definite does not contradict the teaching that all karma can be purified. Purification may remove the result entirely or transform the manner in which it is experienced.

Positive karma and the reach of bodhicitta

The law of karmic increase applies equally to positive actions. One moment of genuine compassion or bodhicitta reaches far beyond the immediate situation.

Geshe-la describes bodhicitta as a form of communication with numberless sentient beings. Even if other people do not notice or appreciate our loving intention, it is not meaningless. A compassionate and ethical mind changes the world inhabited by others.

If one person refrains from killing, the world becomes safer because it contains one less source of violence. If one person refrains from lying, beings are safer from deception. The conduct of a single individual therefore has universal significance.

Protecting the bank balance of merit

Although people work hard to secure happiness, money, education and material success cannot produce lasting fulfilment by themselves. The fundamental cause of happiness is merit: wholesome action supported by a beneficial motivation.

Our encounter with Dharma, our attraction to compassion and bodhicitta, and even our wish to understand enlightenment are evidence of substantial merit accumulated previously. Geshe-la compares this to an enormous bank balance.

Because modern life leaves limited time for concentrated practice, we should protect the merit already accumulated. Anger is the principal danger. Shantideva teaches that a moment of intense anger can destroy vast accumulations of merit.

Anger is like holding a burning coal with the intention of throwing it at an enemy. Whether or not it reaches the other person, the person holding it is burned first. Anger immediately destroys peace, harms the body and mind, and disturbs family members and everyone nearby.

Mindfulness therefore includes noticing harmful states quickly, avoiding negative actions and purifying them immediately when they occur.

Refuge and bodhicitta

The formal Vajrasattva practice begins by renewing refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

- **Buddha** is the awakened guide.
- **Dharma** is the realised wisdom and the path taught by the Buddha.
- **Sangha** especially refers to those who have realised and embody that path.

Refuge is not merely a temporary request for protection. It is a commitment to rely upon enlightened guidance until enlightenment is attained.

Bodhicitta gives purification its Mahayana purpose. We purify not simply to avoid our own suffering but to remove everything preventing us from benefiting others fully. To liberate all sentient beings from suffering and its causes, we must attain enlightenment ourselves; therefore we purify negative karma through Vajrasattva meditation and recitation.

Visualising Vajrasattva

Vajrasattva embodies the purified enlightened mind of all the buddhas. His name suggests an indestructible being or indestructible mind.

Visualise Vajrasattva seated above the crown of the head on a white lotus and moon disc. He is white, with one face and two arms. His right hand holds a vajra at his heart, and his left holds a bell at his thigh.

At his heart is a moon disc bearing the syllable HUM, surrounded by the hundred-syllable mantra. If visualising every syllable is difficult, imagine a circle of brilliant white light or energy.

Vajrasattva should not be regarded as an ordinary external being. He is inseparable from the guru and the enlightened mind of all the buddhas, appearing in a form that allows us to purify and recognise our own clear-light nature.

Three purification visualisations

While reciting the mantra, purification can be visualised in three ways.

Downward purification

White light and nectar enter through the crown and wash sickness, spirit harm, negative karma and obscurations downward and out of the body. Impurities may appear as smoke, soot, tar, dirty oil, insects, snakes or other unpleasant substances.

Upward purification

The nectar fills the body from below, pushing negativities upward and out through the crown, like oil rising to the surface of water.

Instantaneous purification

Brilliant light radiates from Vajrasattva's heart. The moment it touches us, every obscuration disappears, just as darkness vanishes immediately when a light is switched on.

The visualisations may be associated with sickness, harmful energies and karmic obscurations; with body, speech and mind; or with gross, subtle and very subtle obscurations. The important point is to use the method that creates the strongest confidence in purification.

Confidence and moving forward

At the conclusion of purification, imagine Vajrasattva saying:

“Child of the lineage, your negativities, obscurations, and broken and damaged pledges have been completely purified.”

We should trust the enlightened mind more than the deluded mind. After creating the causes of purification, we should not immediately reassert the identity, “I am bad; I am impure.”

Negative karma is dependently arisen and does not exist permanently or inherently. If it were fixed in the nature of the mind, purification would be impossible. Because it depends on causes and conditions, it can be opposed and transformed.

Confidence does not mean becoming careless. We continue daily purification and restraint, but we do not keep imprisoning ourselves in a negative identity after applying the antidote.

Compassion begins with oneself

Geshe-la emphasises that compassion for all beings begins with genuine compassion for oneself.

Self-care means creating the causes of our own happiness and protecting the mind from anger, jealousy, discouragement and low self-esteem. The thought “I am not good enough” is a temporary mental projection, not the true nature of the person.

Activities that increase selfishness, confusion, isolation or depression are not genuine self-care. We transform ourselves because our ability to help others depends upon the quality of our own mind. To free others from suffering, we must work with the causes of suffering in ourselves; to bring others happiness, we must understand genuine happiness.

Absorption and divine pride

At the end of the practice, Vajrasattva melts into white light and descends through the crown to the heart. The external Vajrasattva merges inseparably with the innate purity of one's own clear-light mind.

We then identify with the pure being rather than with a fixed, miserable or impure identity. This is called divine pride, but it is not egoistic pride. It is confidence in the mind's enlightened potential.

Genuine divine pride produces humility, compassion and respect. If we see ourselves as Vajrasattva while judging others as inferior or impure, ordinary pride has merely adopted religious language.

Tantric practice protects the mind from impure appearance and conception. Initiations and ritual knowledge become meaningful only when they transform the mind. Without renunciation, bodhicitta and emptiness, even advanced practice can become another support for ego. The sign of genuine Dharma practice is increasing humility.

Method, wisdom and the bodies of a buddha

The six perfections (generosity, ethical discipline, patience, joyous effort, concentration and wisdom) develop the two accumulations.

The accumulation of method is created principally through love, compassion, bodhicitta and the first five perfections. It becomes a cause of a buddha's form bodies: the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya.

The accumulation of wisdom arises through realising selflessness and emptiness. It becomes a cause of the dharmakaya, the wisdom body of a buddha.

The complete path therefore joins method and wisdom, compassion and emptiness, relative truth and ultimate truth, and purification with the accumulation of merit.

Emptiness completes purification

The person who purifies, the act of purification and the karma being purified do not exist inherently from their own side. They exist through causes, conditions, parts, relationships and mental designation.

This does not mean that actions and consequences are nonexistent. They function conventionally. But because they are dependently arisen rather than fixed and independent, transformation is possible.

Emptiness therefore provides the deepest foundation for purification. Negative karma can be purified precisely because it is not the permanent nature of the mind.

Central message

Vajrasattva purification brings together an honest understanding of karma, regret without self-hatred, reliance upon enlightened guidance, practical remedies, realistic restraint, compassion, confidence and wisdom.

We acknowledge harmful actions without identifying ourselves permanently with them. We purify promptly because karma grows and does not disappear by itself. We protect and increase positive karma, especially bodhicitta, and guard our accumulated merit from anger.

Finally, we recognise that the mind's stains are dependent and temporary. By uniting the four opponent powers with refuge, bodhicitta and the wisdom of emptiness, purification becomes not merely the removal of past wrongdoing but a complete path towards the enlightened body, speech and mind of Vajrasattva.