

Pujas

Pujas are spiritual practices that include taking refuge, generating an altruistic heart, making offerings, reciting prayers of request, chanting mantras while meditating, and dedicating the merit. In monasteries and dharma centres, these practices are done in a group in order to increase the benefits of the practice.

The actual meaning of “puja” is to make happy or to please. Who are we pleasing? If we make another human being happy by praising them or offering them beautiful things, their ego will become inflated. But when we make praises and offerings to the Buddhas they have no ego so they receive pure bliss and can transform this into emptiness. Emptiness is the source from which all the afflictive emotions and obstacles to omniscience can be destroyed. Buddhas do not have these obstacles but we sentient beings do. So in order to help us destroy them, we try to please the Buddhas through our spiritual practices.

Buddhas do not desire our offerings, praises and recitations. They already gave up attachment to all these samsaric things. But we need the merit from doing these practices. When Buddhas and Bodhisattvas receive bliss, at the same time we receive much merit and virtue.

If we plant a good quality seed in the ground but it does not receive water, sun, heat, compost and fertilizer then instead of making a beautiful flower it will rot. Similarly, we may try to plant good actions with our body, speech and mind but if our virtue is not enough there is no way to create the source of enlightenment. We need merit, a positive motivation, a good heart, positive speech and positive actions to achieve enlightenment.

Just having a good heart without taking action is not enough, as this does not allow us to accumulate the merit we need to achieve enlightenment. But merit alone is also not enough. A bird needs two wings in order to fly. Similarly, in order to achieve enlightenment we need both good merit and wisdom. Pujas help us to accumulate merit and thus provide one of the wings we need to reach enlightenment.

In addition to the benefit from doing puja practice, there is also much merit to be received from reciting mantras. Buddha Shakyamuni said that if one person possessing billions of dollars were to use it to make countless offerings to the Buddhas or cover the whole earth in stupas, this merit can be measured. But the merit of reciting even just one mantra of the Buddha is immeasurable. Buddha also said that through his omniscience he could count the vast grains of sand in all the oceans of the world but he could not count the merit received by one person reciting one mantra of the Buddhas.

You might think that if this is true you should have already achieved enlightenment. But this does not generally happen because as quickly as we pile up merit, we erase it through such actions as getting angry, disagreeing with our spiritual teachers, or disrespecting the three jewels.

There are many different deities we make offerings to during pujas but in essence all deities are the same. They are all pure mind or ultimate Buddha nature. All deities are manifested from pure mind in accordance with our appearances. For this reason there are both male and female deities. There are many stories about how different deities manifested but all have come from pure mind in order to serve sentient beings in specific ways.

“Buddha” does not refer to a specific form or appearance; it refers to the pure qualities of an enlightened mind. Only to work for the benefit of sentient beings does Buddha mind take different forms. Buddha nature manifested as Shakyamuni Buddha in monk's form to provide an example for us to follow. Likewise, Compassion Buddhas, Wisdom Buddhas, Accomplishment Buddhas were manifested to benefit us. The different forms, actions and names only exist to make it easier for us confused beings. By visualizing and focussing our attention on different forms and symbols it is easier to receive the benefits of spiritual practice. Actually all of these forms are non-existent as they are manifestations of pure mind. For that reason, we should not prefer one form to another.

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In a dharma centre we meet as a group to perform pujas. Why do we practice together? The purpose of chanting out loud is to share your spiritual energy as much as you can with others. In a monastery monks gather in large groups to chant loudly in order to increase the power of the chanting and thus the benefit for others. Recitation of spiritual texts within the dharma centre is not singing songs. This is powerful communication with the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

There are good times and bad times during an eon but right now is a time of degeneration (decreasing life span). Shakyamuni Buddha volunteered to look after sentient beings during this difficult time. During this short life it is so hard to practice. Our minds are so stubborn. We love the pleasures of samsara, are reluctant to practice and therefore it is hard to achieve enlightenment. Shakyamuni Buddha's method to work for sentient beings during this time was to bring the Vajrayana teachings here so that sentient beings could quickly accumulate merit, cleanse their negative obscurations and achieve enlightenment within this short life span. Other Buddhas only give sutra teachings so to have a Buddha teaching the Vajrayana practices is very rare. We are very fortunate to have been born during this time.

When you chant, whether at home or in the dharma centre, do so clearly and slowly. We experience that those who chant quickly, their life becomes shorter. Those who chant slowly and gently, their lives last longer. This is a very subtle but observable effect. Also, besides sustaining your life, when you chant slowly you can contemplate and understand the meaning of the words.

When you practice with a group, please recite the prayers as loudly as possible. If you sang on a stage how loudly would you sing so that the whole audience could hear? Within the shrine room there are many insects, form beings, and formless beings. On the street outside, there are many people passing by. If we chant loudly, think about how many beings can hear these words and receive the blessing. Do not be nervous; be confident. Remember that reciting these practices is of great benefit to all sentient beings.

In general we do practices to increase merit like Tara, Chenresig and Guru Puja during the waxing moon (first day to full moon) and practices to decrease negative karma like Vajrasattva during the waning moon (day after full moon to new moon). In our centre we try to do most pujas during our Sunday morning sits at 11:00 a.m. But those who are spiritual practitioners do not need to wait for the right phase of the moon cycle or a specific day of the week. Practice every day in order to increase your virtue and merit and decrease your negative karma.

*The teachings on this page were transmitted orally by Kushok Lobsang Dhamchöe.
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