

## **PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT – MERIT ACCUMULATION THROUGH DANA OFFERING**

Good afternoon everyone! It's wonderful to see you all. Even though you're very busy, a lot of you are preparing tomorrow's big celebration; Columbus Day right? Still you came here today; that's wonderful. Today's subject is the first Paramita. Buddha talked about the six Paramitas. What is important of this first Paramita? Why Buddha didn't talk about the Dana Paramita last or in the middle? Why did he first choose Dana Paramita to talk? There were some reasons and we'll talk about them today.

### **THE THREE TYPES OF DANA**

Dana means generosity, to accumulate merit. There are three ways to accumulate merits. The first Dana offering is the offering to the Dharma. Dharma teaching is priceless. Many objects we can put big numbers, for instance one hundred thousand dollars or million dollars. But Dharma is priceless. So Buddha first gave this teaching because it liberates all cause of sufferings and how to be free from sufferings. The second Dana offering is one works physically towards positive – to service. The third Dana offering is offering materials. These are the three types of Dana offerings.

Now we go back to the First Dana Offering – Offering Dharma to accumulate merits. There are many ways for us to achieve accomplishments during this lifetime. But the most profound way to liberate and to be free from suffering is the highest achievement. We have pain and temporary suffering and we also need to get out of these sufferings. But the most joy we receive is when we help or serve others and your community, whatever we can help. This is one of the best ways to accumulate merits. Better still if you do it with motivation, it makes huge difference. Even though sometimes we do not have enough wisdom, but the action of helping others, could even result in rainbow body attainment – the highest transformation of physical body to the Dharmakaya form.

### **A STORY OF THE FAMOUS DRIKUNG-THIL CEMETERY**

I am now telling you some story the significance of merit accumulation and what does it mean by accumulating merit and how merit can benefit us and what kind of benefits there are. The founder of our lineage (Drikung Kagyü) and the second Nagarjuna – Lord Jigten Sumgön, was very famous in Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Lord Jigten Sumgön had hundred thousand disciples who were great masters and some even attained high

realization. For merit accumulation, offering money is not the only way to accumulate merit; if you have, it is wonderful but if you don't have, you could offer service, which will result in the same realization. One day Lord Jigten Sumgön took some students from each retreat place to the famous cemetery, called "*Ten-Chak*". Usually cemeteries are called "*Thru-Trug*". But in the Drikung-Thil monastery, this cemetery is called "*Ten-Chak*". This cemetery is different than others and now I'll explain why. "*Ten*" means holy objects like relics, "*Chak*" means broom gathering together; you can't collect one or two pieces (of relics) because they are countless. So how this "*Ten-Chak*" has any connection with merit accumulation? What about the relationship of "*Ten-Chak*" with this story of Lord Jigten Sumgön in inviting some of his students including his personal attendant to the cemetery? This personal attendant had always been very close to Lord Jigten Sumgön and was always present at all his teachings. Other practitioners and retreatants were also invited to the cemetery. The tea-master who serviced tea was also invited to the cemetery. Lord Jigten Sumgön said, "*I have taught a lot of teachings to you for many years, we talked a lot about our practice and now I want to see the proof of your practice; I want to see how much you have achieved.*" All retreat masters and practitioners started showing their practice to Lord Jigten Sumgön as requested. Some walked in the sky while some flew – many were performing all kinds of miracles. Even the tea-master also performed a miracle. When the sun rose in the morning, he put a ladle in the sky to hold the sky. This was a sign of high realization. Now you may wonder how this tea-master who was always working in the kitchen found chance to learn Dharma and at the same time achieved such high attainment. The point is even though he was always working in the kitchen, with good motivation to serve other Dharma practitioners, he acquired the same benefit power like other Dharma practitioners. If you didn't get benefit, what is the point of giving service to those doing three years or extended years of retreats?

## **ONE GETS TO ACCUMULATE MERITS BY OFFERING SERVICES TO PRACTITIONERS**

For those doing long term retreats, somebody would have to bring food to him or her. The Great Milerapa said, "*When he or she is doing retreat at the high mountain, whoever bringing food, medicine or clothing to serve him or her, the latter will gain the same realization as the practitioner performing the retreat because of the connection established through this service.*" The retreat people understand that without basic necessities that are offered to them from others, they would not be survived. Therefore they would have to make dedications at the end of the day during the entire retreat. You would say it's a 50-50 merit sharing. But perhaps it'd be a little bit more (than 50) because practitioners always want to help other sentient beings. This means retreat people will know who have served them and they would have the responsibility now to

make the dedication to those offering service to them. It's not about whether the practitioner has power to liberate others or not, but by following the same aspiration of Samantabhadra, Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara in the past who also performed the same dedication, to dedicate their practice to those who have served them.

## MOTIVATION IS ALL IT MATTERS

So back to the story, the personal attendant was shocked to see the miracles performed by other practitioners including the tea-master. The personal attendant had forgotten his practice even though everyone assumed the personal attendant would be the first one to show his attainment in the crowd; because of this, the personal attendant suddenly passed away right there. Previously this personal attendant had always thought that his best practice offering to Lord Jigten Sumgön was to build a big golden stupa for Lord Jigten Sumgön after Lord Jigten Sumgön passed away. This indicated the strong grasping of his mind on forms without understanding Dharma. This contributed to his lack of realization although he had always been physically close to Lord Jigten Sumgön and being physically at present at all the teachings of Lord Jigten Sumgön. However due to his dedication and pure motivation for years in serving Lord Jigten Sumgön as well as the power of Lord Jigten Sumgön, his body produced many relics when Lord Jigten Sumgön performed the Phowa ceremony for him by just pointing a stick at the forehead of his dead body. This is how the name "*Ten-Chak*" was given as the relics were too many and required a broom to gather all the relics together.

## THE TWO-FOLD ACCUMULATIONS - MERIT AND WISDOM

So there are two things of accumulation – accumulating merit and accumulating wisdom. Another related story is, after Lord Jigten Sumgön sent thousands and thousands of monks to retreat in three places – Mt. Kailesh, Tshari and Lapchi. These three places are the holy places for Chakrasamvara's body, speech and mind. Mt. Kailesh represented Lord Jigten Sumgön. Chorje Tenma Drakpa was the retreat master leading the retreat in Mt. Kailesh. There's one naro (yak) that sometimes transported goods for the retreat master living high up in the mountain. This animal carried food for the retreat master. These days we have trucks and trains and airplanes. But during that time, there were horses, mules and yaks. This yak had no motivation (understanding) of serving this retreat master. But he's just carrying the retreat masters' and other yogis' food. When I visited that holy place, I have seen with my own eyes the footprint of this yak on the rocks. This yak attained rainbow body when it died. This yak was just an ordinary animal without any motivation to practice Dharma, but because of its service to other

practitioners, the benefit obtained was no more or no less (just 50-50), yet it attained rainbow body. This is very unique.

## JOYFUL MIND WHEN PERFORMING TASK = JOYFUL RESULT

So now we are back to this traffic - Dana. When we do anything, our mind has to be delighted and feeling joyful. Anything you do, if the mind is joyful, the result will be high. Anything you do, without a joyful mind, even though the result could be big, your mind won't be in agreement with your result. Your first open, it has to be joyful, and then the result and accomplishment will be joyful. Dharma at the beginning is virtue and joy. The path is joy. And the result is joy.

## DANA PARAMITA SEPARATES "ME" AND "MY"

If you follow Dharma, Dharma never gives you suffering. The problem is we never follow Buddha's direction; sometimes we think we're smart and go off track and then we're stuck somewhere. Likewise, the Dana Paramita is very important, which is why Buddha taught this first. Why? Because we have very strong self-grasping - this holding on "self" very tight. That's why this "me" and "my" are very unique language in human history. We don't even need to teach kids – they already know how to say "*This is my.... That's mine...*" As we grow older, our "me" and "my" even get longer, "*Don't touch, this is myyyyyy....*" Dana can separate "me" and "my" through joy and open. There's an exercise; for example you have something inexpensive, you may find it difficult to give to others immediately, so you start with using your right hand to give your left hand and then left hand giving to your right hand. This is because sometimes we don't even trust our left hand because you're right-handed and your left hand isn't as strong. Therefore you need to trust yourself first through this practice. Then you can start giving inexpensive thing to your close friend and then next slightly more expensive material to them, such as adding another "zero" to the material (students laughing, Lama Sonam added, "*You know what I'm talking about.*"). This exercise allows you to gradually open up. Dana Paramita is cutting the attachment; cutting the self-grasping. Dana Paramita practice is huge. Most of you know this "Chod" practice. Everybody loves "Chod" practice. What are you giving in "Chod" practice? You're giving the most expensive thing – your body, your virtues and your merit accumulation. Who are you giving to? It's not your friend or your family but any beings like ghosts, demons, yakshas, those you do not know, and you just give everything and nothing left with fear, doubt and hope. But right now we have too many attachments, we always think, "*Oh I will do this one so maybe I'll achieve this wish. But maybe if I didn't do this one, then I'll fail and have*

*doubt.*” The Dana Paramita can make a huge difference. This is why the first of the Six Paramitas is the Dana Paramita to open up our practice.

## **MAKING ASPIRATIONS FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS WITH PURE MOTIVATION IS A FORM OF DHARMA PRACTICE.**

There are many different types of actions for practice, such as you practice meditation, service or even just thinking could be a huge difference too. Lord Buddha said sometimes we don't have time to practice, somebody build some stupa, monastery or hospital, if your mentality says “*I wish I could give something like this as I know this is needed by others.*”...also like right at this moment, we do not know how to stop this new disease (Ebola), if your mind said I wish I could stop. How you could that? There are many Boddhisattvas around us. I think many of you know this story. There was one Dharma King during the time in a small kingdom in India. At that time there was a deadly disease that did not have any cure or medicine, but it was said that there was only one special fish, that's called “Rali”, could be the cure. Yet that special fish was not found in the water nearby. The King was so compassionate and wished to remove the tremendous suffering of the people in his kingdom. He just jumped to the water and vowed to take rebirth as this special type of fish to cure the disease of his kingdom. Because his aspiration prayer was so strong and powerful, as soon as he was dead, the fish was reborn in the lake. His body flesh kept regenerated itself once it was cut by the people in his kingdom to use as medicine. Whenever the body was cut, its flesh grew back, until everyone was cured because of the King's strong motivation to save everyone suffering from the disease. Likewise if we don't have the capacity like those Boddhistvas to help, but we have the motivation of helping by prayers or by other methods to help, just this thinking motivation could make a huge difference. Your action? Absolutely. That's why Lord Buddha said, “*Even though you're just thinking by meditation, the action is huge.*” But you walk one step; your feet could make changes life after life. Your thinking to do meditation, to do retreat or to do service to the community, is the most profound way to change your mind; it's no longer thinking just “me” and “my”, instead of how I could serve others in this life. So as Buddhist practitioners, we can think of how to do prayers to stop the disease, or like the middle-east crisis, we don't want suffering, the people at the middle-east also do not want suffering but for some reason they are killing each other, this is so sad, so sad. So this way, the merit is very powerful and therefore your thinking is possible to become real. That's why we say thinking is not ordinary thinking – it is motivation.

## **WE FIRST WORK ON SMALL THINGS AND THEN ONLY WE DO SOMETHING BIGGER.**

Now before you start working on anything, the first thing is you have to think first. We first work on small things and then we'll do something bigger. Everyone knows that this week the youngest Nobel Prize winner – the young Pakistani lady, and also the Indian guy....they came from two different places, but both share the same caring to kids. You can look at her photos – she's very small size, she's very young, but her motivation surprised everyone. So this is her motivation. When the Taliban came to ask "*Who is Malala?*"; she had to humbly admit she was Malala. Everyone was shocked that she admitted. She wanted to response that she was Malala because she wanted to fight for all the girls to receive education. This is her aspiration. Now let's go back to Dharma.

## **HOW TO HELP ALL SENTIENT BEINGS? THAT'S A BIG NUMBER; I CAN'T EVEN HELP MYSELF.**

Many people lamented that Buddha taught us to help "all sentient beings". This is too big, you know. Many people complained, "*Come on, now I'm even having difficulty to pay my rent, I'm struggling with my car and gas payments. How am I going to help sentient beings? Big number!*" That's really not the case. You accumulate merits. First you have motivation. We always call this motivation as the Vajrayana motivation. Shantideva said, "*You don't have to worry that you don't have the capacity right now. When the condition arrives, you'll become victorious.*" Like right now, our mind is like this light in a small room. Sooner or later when we're awakening, our mind will become sun, shining light for the entire earth; no more darkness. Right now we have a lot of corner space with some darkness. We have doubt, looks like the corners at the basements, very dusty doubt. We always have doubt; maybe this is not good, that is not so good. For accumulating merit, we don't need to have doubts.

## **BUDDHA HAS GIVEN US THE INSTRUCTION, NOW IT'S UP TO US TO TAKE ACTION.**

So remember, the Buddha said, "*Beginning is pure, the middle path is pure and the result is also pure.*" If we follow these kinds of Buddha's teachings; Buddha's teachings are not necessarily devotion only. You can examine if Buddha's teachings make sense or not. Regardless of what Buddha said or somebody said something; whether they are beneficial or not, you need to experience yourself. That's why you need to act; action is very important. So you will have to take action to test, if this food is sour or sweet. And you hear it many times but the real taste is only when your tongue touches the food.

Otherwise we don't know the taste. We have heard many cuisines of different nationalities, only your hearing can enjoy but not your tongue. If you want to completely enjoy (the food), then you need to go near the food, smell, taste and digest it. So Buddha's teachings are exactly the same, in giving you all the information on how to be the best practitioner in order to help sentient beings. Like we just talked about the Dana Paramita – the small Dana Paramita can make a huge difference. Similarly for negativities, for example when you make virtues for many things, it's like the dry woods of mountain size (of your merits accumulated), then you destroy your virtues by your anger, jealousy, wrong view *etc.* those non-virtuous just like a small spark fire and burn off all the virtues - very powerful. Likewise, if you accumulate merit, even if it's of small size, could purify many aeons of negative karma completely and you could be awakened within one lifetime. This way, the Dana Paramita seems like opening the door to welcome liberation for oneself and others. I think I'll stop here; if I talk more, then it could be more confusing. If you have answers, then I'll try to see if I have answers for them or not.

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### QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Student: Lama-la you mentioned Six Paramitas. What are they?

Lama Sonam: The first one is **Dana** Paramita. The second is the **Moral** or *Sheila* Paramita....then the **Patience** Paramita. We'll talk about Patience Paramita some other day; it is very important and sweet. Then there's **Perseverance**, **Samadhi (Concentration)** and **Wisdom**. These are the Six Paramitas.

Student: Lama about doubt...let's say you have doubt but you go ahead and do the action anyway even if you have doubt in your mind. Does it decrease the merit of your action? Does it affect the karma of your action?

Lama Sonam: If you have doubt, the results will not be fully accomplished. It is impossible. [For example someone from Midwest is coming to Boston. Your visitor is trying to meet you, somewhere on Route-93. However your visitor doesn't know which way is South-93 and which way is North-93 and then he/she just doubtfully picks one direction thinking, "*I think it is ok if I pick this route. I think it is alright.*" Then now the person's in trouble because of his/her doubts without checking the direction with you; he is actually driving towards the south while you're actually waiting for him/her in the north.]\* So what do you think?

Student: So I think what you're saying is doubt affects the action and won't be as pure and it may not end up not as meritorious if it's done in doubt.

Lama Sonam: Maybe..maybe...we have a lot of guesses. Maybe you'd be shocked. First of all, you'd say, "*I know.*" First you have some sort of guesses. When you get there, then you'd say "*I knew.*" "*I felt so.*" But when you're wrong, you would not say, "*I feel I'm wrong.*" This means doubt is not resulting much in your action. But there is nothing wrong with being doubtful. Practice your doubt, which means you need to check double times. You know, this way without doubt, how could you make sure? Your doubt will make sure...

Student: Excuse me, to make sure what?

Lama Sonam: To make sure you're going North-93, make sure don't go to South.

Student: From the pragmatism point of view, and that's one aspect of Buddhism that's very much appeals to me. What if you're being doubtful and you're on the highway. And you say, well the Buddha said such-and-such, and I'll follow but I'll wait and see what the tangible results are and then you observe the tangible results after your action and you say, "*This reinforces my faith in the Buddha's teachings because at the pragmatic level it seems to work as opposed to back the thought it is coming from a higher authority.*" So do you accept that interpretation?

Lama Sonam: Yes and no. Yes, because you need to make sure so I'm waiting. No, why? Until your results come, how long will you wait? Before it happens (your results come), then maybe you'll be doubtful all the way to Bardo. You can have doubt, but that doubt is for you to make sure and once you've made sure and that's it, no more doubt.

Student: Lama, can you say the three categories of service again for merit accumulations?

Lama Sonam: First one is accumulate merit through the Dharma. Dharma means huge right? Such as learning the Dharma, serving the Dharma, read the Dharma, all the part of doing teaching related. The second one is called "*Sang-Sing*"; it means offering food, clothing, and taking care practitioners *ex cetera*. Third one is "*Mi-Jib-Du-Galp-Po-Jib-Bo*"; this one is deeper – it means to sacrifice oneself to help somebody. Say this is very dangerous, someone on the other side of the river but you know this person needs help.

However there are a lot of dangers in the river, so you have to sacrifice yourself to protect him or her. But what we are talking today is how we can physically and mentally help. These are the three different categories of service.

Student: Lama-la, when you say teaching - the first type of Dharma service. What examples are they...in the sense of meditation or what?

Lama Sonam: Yes, remember the connection I just gave earlier, meditation or someone in the retreat that we provide them service, or you yourself in the retreat, or someone living in a place practicing and someone serves him or her...the merits accumulated will be the same, but in this case, "*Chogye-Jinpa*" means the person who's giving service to the awakening objects, is very for important, no longer confused in the samsara, to clear the confusion. These days, we have a lot of good examples. For example GPS, you have to make sure the spelling (of the address) is correct, zip-code is correct, and don't doubt. Maybe sometimes my eyesight is not so good, I mix up 6 with 9. Then you won't get it (the correct direction). This is not that GPS was wrong; it was because of my thought since I didn't check it carefully. So doubt is always good, that means you would check once again to make sure (you did it correctly) and then you'd get it – your destination. The "Google Wisdom" can show everything. Similarly, this is related to Dharma; when the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas said something, means you not only devotion, but you need to check too. Buddha said that we don't just follow his teachings with devotion without checking. You need to check; you need to search like a gold miner checking and polishing the gold to be shiny. If the gold is real, no matter what you do with it, the gold's nature is so shiny and will never turn yellow or maybe green. Buddha's teachings do not need immediate devotion at the beginning; rather you need to search whether the teachings are beneficial and how they would benefit us.

Student: What is merit?

Lama Sonam: Merit means "*Jin-Pa*". It means giving. We give doesn't mean we do not receive. That's not the case. When you're thinking to give, you're already receiving the joy. In the beginning, your mind feels joy through giving. And the result is joy through getting it. You know? So this way you will see. I'll tell you this story that when you're giving, your mind will be very open and it'll open joy. Not me, but for those with some realization, they will know what you're thinking, you know? One of the Drikung masters, Agong Rinpoche; he's now in the second reincarnation. Anyway he is a fully enlightened master. From Drikung Thil Monastery to Lhasa, it probably takes three to four hours' drive, kind of like from here to New York. Very far. But sometimes Rinpoche would bring

say New York's 42 street some famous food or what you call hotdogs or bagels when someone said they wanted the food fresh. So Agong Rinpoche \*snap fingers\* immediately transported the food freshly made just like that within a short time. One day, some family wanted to see him to make some offering to him. The husband and wife of this family wanted to offer some butter to him. But one of them said, "*We can give all to him.*" But the other disagreed and suggested half only. But in the end they concluded to just offer all that butter to Rinpoche. The moment they entered at the retreat house of Rinpoche high up in a mountain, which was far away from their house, Rinpoche remarked, "*I only deserve half, not whole. But you guys spent the whole morning discussing how much to offer to me.*" Actually offering "half" resembles impure mind while the other "half" resembles pure mind. This story showed the realized master could see everything. This is why for Dana Paramita; we have to give with joy. This "*Jin-Pa*" means as soon as we give or serve, like serving your center or your community or even like helping your grandparents or kids, anything you just think of helping to a second or a third person, you get some merits immediately. We didn't see the merits but later on, you'd feel very joyful and say that, "*I'm so lucky; I served my parents, my community or my center.*" If you didn't do something, later you'd think that "*I wish I had.*" Then you wish a lot of wishes but all these become zero wishes because the time has gone. Accumulating merit creates a lot of joy that would make you feel you've done something great. So this is the power of merit. I always say that the American people are very lucky. You get to serve your parents anytime. Your parents, relatives or anyone, you could just go there anytime, maybe fly a few hours or drive a few hours. But for us (Tibetans), we don't have such kind of Karma. I'm not saying we have bad Karma. But this is a huge difference; you guys have accumulated a lot of merits, whilst for me maybe lesser Karma for me to have the relationship to physically serve my mother, father and my teacher. It is only in my mentality that I'm not far from them – the non-duality "close-ness". But physically I can't offer those fruits to them but for you, you could offer anytime. So those are the powers of merits in terms of how close your relationship with your relatives.

Student: I once have a teacher who said that there's no merit in merit. What he meant was if you do things for the merits, you don't get the merits.

Lama Sonam: There's a Tibetan saying that if you don't have butter, you need to offer butter lamps. If you don't have *tsampa* (roasted barley flour), you need to make *tsampa tsog* (gathering) offering. This does sound funny. You'd be thinking if I don't have how I could make offering. You need to make offering to accumulate merits. Does that mean if you give Buddha or *Dzambala* (Buddha of Wealth) then he or she would be happy and would give me what I need? This is not the case. Previously we didn't give to other

beings or share with other beings; therefore in this life we have so many wishes in our mind. Our wishes are not in our hands but only in our mind. Again, we have to accumulate merits, even if it (the action) looks small. Remember this story - in Buddha's lifetime, there's one attendant with bad memory. Buddha still allowed him to stay at the temple but required him to just do one thing – cleaning the temple and cleaning the bathroom of the temple. Buddha asked him to remember only one mantra – “*Dul-Chak Til-Ma-Chak*”. “*Dul-Chak*” means cleaning dust, cleaning negative emotions and negative karma. So this attendant only focused on cleaning and polishing, inside and outside. As the result, he cleaned his mind and he became the most sharp-minded disciples of the Buddha. What he did was just cleaning the temple. Such stories are countless. Of course we usually would think the merit is small. It's like in the spring, farmers planting small seeds of crops say barley on the ground, but in the fall the crops doubled or even tripled, then we could enjoy. This makes sense about how motivation works. Say you put maybe one rice grain, four seasons later, how much rice yield, maybe 90, maybe 100. One grain gets transformed to 90 or 80. This is big number. But we never think like this; we think this sounds magic. This is how merit accumulation works. Small seeds (= merits) can make everybody happy. The farm only plants for example one big bag of corn or maybe rice, but the resulting harvest is 10 or 20 big bags. Now how many people could enjoy from the harvest. A few farmers can do this, just like practitioners. We think we can do something in this life and you're thinking and thinking and they can come true. Likewise for bad thoughts, we don't always think of bad thought because they will come true too. That's why should always think of good thoughts, that will benefit our body and will be healthy to our mind.

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This teaching was given by **Venerable Lama Konchok Sonam**, the Spiritual Director of the Drikung Kagyü Meditation Center (DMC) & Jokhang Institute, Boston, on 12 October 2014. The teaching was sponsored by the Merit-Making Team (MMT) of DMC in celebration of MMT Day (official birthday of MMT).

This teaching was transcribed by *Siddhartha-Gautama's Follower* and proof-read by Melissa Silva.

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\*Editing note: This was rephrased from the original words for better understanding.