

Synopses of all Retreats with edited materials

Summarised retreats with edited versions of the most relevant talks.

1 Mahakarunika Sadhana: 10-16 April 2020

Summary

This retreat is centred upon the sadhana practice of Avalokiteśvara as Mahakarunika, the Great Compassionate One. With his piled hair and deerskin, Avalokiteśvara appears as a cave-dwelling yogin, a meditator, not someone doing charitable work. He certainly inspires active work in the world to alleviate suffering, but in this classic four-armed manifestation with mala, lotus and praying gesture he is more about realising the nature and energy of compassion in meditation and then teaching to others. For the Buddha, too, teaching was the highest form of compassion. That is because though helping others practically is something we should all do, only the dharma can really free people from suffering.

I've practised the sadhana of Mahakarunika and Mahamudra Conjoint since Sangharakshita entrusted me with it in 1980, including over several years on long solitary retreat.

The conceptual teachings on the retreat feature a commentary on two translations of the sadhana, one by John Driver, who Sangharakshita knew at the time he received the initiation from Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro Rinpoche, and another by Lama Tillman Lhundrup, who translated the same sadhana at my request when I visited him in 2008.

The retreat practices cover all the main points within the sadhana, which is one of the most complex in the Order's current set. I give instructions on the stages of the practice overall, the inner body in relation to the self-generated image (including some extra instructions on the vase breath), the pointing out instruction that takes place within the sadhana, the completion stage practice after the pointing out, the visualisation of the six realms connected to the Avalokiteśvara mantra, and a ritual puja version of the sadhana for chanting out loud.

The Sadhana of Mahakarunika & Mahamudra

A practice commentary

Below is the Mahakarunika practice that Sangharakshita received from Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro Rinpoche in Kalimpong. The translation he had made by John Driver, and which is more familiar to practitioners of my generation, is at the left; Lama Tillman's, which contains useful clarifications, is at the right. We shall be referring to both translations throughout the commentary, which follows. Numbers in brackets refer to Driver's notes, which are included at the end of the translations.

<p>The Spiritual Practice of Mahakarunika⁽¹⁾ and Mahamudra Conjointly</p> <p>composed by the All-knowing (Khun-Khyen) dKhon-mChog Lhun-grub.⁽²⁾</p>	
<p>In Three Parts:</p> <p>(1) Lineage Entreaty</p> <p>(2) Main Practice</p> <p>(3) Explanation (Lhundrup's translation)</p>	
<p><i>Translation by John Driver 1960s</i></p>	<p><i>Translation by Tillman Lhundrup 2008 based on Driver's rendition in consultation with Kamalashila</i></p>
<p>Part One: The Lineage Entreaty</p>	
<p>Bestower of Best Transmutation</p>	<p>Bestower of Supreme Blessings</p>
<p>Being the lineage-entreaty of Conjoint Mahakarunika and Mahamudra, with the Prayer for the Path and its stages.</p>	<p>The lineage prayer of conjoint Mahakarunika and Mahamudra, with the Prayer for the Path and its stages.</p>
<p>NAMO GURU-LOKESVARAYA</p>	<p>Namo Guru-Lokesvara Ya</p>
<p>Leader, Lord of the Ten Strengths, Pinnacle of the Sakyas;</p>	<p>To the Lord of the Ten Powers, Pinnacle of the Sakyas;</p>

<p>dGra-las rNam-rGyal; rDo-rje gdan-pa; and Ba-ri locava; Sa-chen bSod-nams rTse; rje-bTsun grags-pa; to these I make entreaty! Great pandit of Sa-sKya, Tshogs-sgom nan-chen-pa; bSod-nams sKyabs; gZuns-dPal-tshul-ba; Sar-chen chos-rje; Nor-chen rDo-rje Chan; Sems-dPa' chen-po; to these I make entreaty! Kun-mKhyen chen-po; Yons'dzin dKon-mchog 'Phel; Lha-mChog Sans-rGyas Sen-ge; Nam-mKha'i mTshan; dPal-lDan Don-grub; Ses-rab 'Byun-gNas; and Kun-dGa' Legs-pa, to these I make entreaty! San-rGyas Phun-tshogs; bsTan-'dzin Lhun-grub; Nam-mKha' bSam-grub; Sa-chen Kun-dga'; Nag-dban Ses-rab-Rin-chen grags-pa; and Chos-kyi rGyal-mTshan; to these I make entreaty!</p>	<p>dGra-las rNam-rGyal; rDo-rje gdan-pa; and Ba-ri locava; Sa-chen bSod-nams rTse; rje-bTsun grags-pa; to these I pray. To the great pandit of Sa-sKya, Tshogs-sgom nyan-chen-po; bSod-nams sKyabs; gZuns-dPal dPal-tshul-ba (The Dharma Master of the great East.) Sar-chen chos-rje; Ngor chan dorje chang; To all these great Bodhisattvas I pray. Kun-mKhyen chen-po; Yongs'dzin dKon-mchog 'Phel; Lha-mChog Sans-rGyas Sen-ge; Nam-mKha'i mTshan; dPal-lDan Don-grub; Shes-rab 'Byun-gNas; and Kun-dGa' Legs-pa, to these I pray. San-rGyas Phun-tshogs; bsTan-'dzin Lhun-grub; Nam-mKha' bSam-grub; Sa-chen Kun-dga'; Nag-dbang Shes-rab-Rin-chen grags-pa; and Chos-kyi rGyal-mTshan (Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro); to these I pray. And to Urgyen Sangharakshita, too, we pray.</p>
<p>To the entire vast host of Buddhas and their Sons, Combine their heaps of compassion into one, the form of Noblest Padmapani: to those who show his 'play', My own and lineal gurus - I make entreaty!</p>	<p>To the supreme Arya Padmapani In whose single form the combined heaps of compassion are gathered Of the entire vast host of Buddhas and their Sons, To those who are endowed with his play My root and lineage teachers, I pray.</p>
<p>By the transmutation so entreated,</p>	<p>By the blessing of this prayer,</p>

<p>That we be taken up in all births by the best counsellor,</p> <p>Be incited by strong feelings or ‘turning away’, unfeigned,</p> <p>And that the generation of Aspiring and Entering Bodhicitta</p> <p>be refined, transmute us.</p> <p>In particular, may the Noble Kayas born from the two stores (14)</p> <p>Image and void conjoined, shine forth like the moon in water;</p> <p>And our family’s master, the guru Measureless Light, the Protector’s</p> <p>Ambrosia of transmutation enter within our heart!</p>	<p>In all lives may we be cared for by the best spiritual friend,</p> <p>Be aroused by renunciation that is non-artificial and strong,</p> <p>And inspired (blessed) to master the Bodhicitta of aspiration and application.</p> <p>In particular:</p> <p>From the two accumulations, may the noble Kayas be born;</p> <p>The union of appearance and emptiness show clear as the moon in water;</p> <p>And the blessed nectar of our protector teacher,</p> <p>the family master Measureless Light, enter our heart.</p>
<p>Thereby may the root of all dharmas, our own mind,</p> <p>Speech, free, primordial, noblest of things,</p> <p>Beyond the elaborations of birth, cease and continuance,</p> <p>be manifestly seen and then ever preserved!</p>	<p>In this way may the root of all dharmas, our own mind,</p> <p>Which is naturalness beyond expression, the ultimate supreme Arya</p> <p>(Beyond the elaborations of birth, cessation and abiding?),</p> <p>Be actually seen and then maintained forever.</p>
<p>When I arise from this, around the letter HRIH, axis of his heart,</p> <p>May the light of circling mantra-garlands effect my own and others’ interest,</p> <p>Transmute my stream-of-consciousness by mentling into my heart,</p> <p>And may I reach perfection in the recitation-yoga - sound and void.</p>	<p>As I arise may the light of mantra garlands which circles the HRIH, vitality of his heart,</p> <p>Accomplish the two benefits,</p> <p>And bless my mindstream by melting into my heart,</p> <p>May I perfect the yoga of recitation, sound and emptiness.</p>
<p>In short, the guru protector Measureless Light, Inseparable from the lotus atop my head, may I ever meditate;</p>	<p>In short, may I always know the guru protector Measureless Light, (meditate, see, feel)</p> <p>As inseparable from the lotus at the top of my head,</p>

<p>And image, sound and consciousness as god, mantra, jnana's</p> <p>Pure play, alone, arise!</p> <p>All stocks of virtue arising from what has thus been amassed,</p> <p>I dedicate entirely to the core of Enlightenment;</p> <p>Thereby may all that move cross over the sea of existence</p> <p>And speedily gain the rank of Avalokita!</p> <p>In those words did the Sakya-bhikshu 'Jam- dbYan mKhyen-brTse'i dBan-po, who received this manner of favour from that axis of doctrine of the ocean vast oral tradition the Vajradhara nag-dBan Legs-grub, make entreaty.</p> <p>Siddhir astu!</p>	<p>And may appearances, sounds and awareness arise only</p> <p>As the pure play of deity, mantra, and timeless awareness.</p> <p>Through the power of complete dedication to the heart of Enlightenment</p> <p>May all beings cross over the ocean of existences</p> <p>And quickly obtain the state of mighty Avalokitesvara.</p> <p>In those words did 'Jam-dbYan mKhyen- brTse'i dBan-po, the bhikshu in the tradition of Shakyamuni, through the kindness of Vajradhara nag-dBan Legs-grub from the oral lineage of the ocean of teachings, receive this and write it down.</p> <p>May accomplishment arise!</p>
<p>Part Two: The Main Practice</p>	
<p>(2) The Spiritual Practice of Mahakarunika⁽¹⁾ and Mahamudra Conjointly</p> <p>composed by the All-knowing dKhon-mChog Lhun-grub.⁽²⁾</p>	<p>(2) The Spiritual Practice of Mahakarunika and Mahamudra How to practise the Great Compassionate One and Mahamudra in Union</p> <p>composed by Khun-khyen dKhon-mChog Lhun-grub</p>
<p>NAMO GURU RATNAVARDHAYA⁽³⁾</p>	<p>NAMO GURU RATNAVARDHAYA</p>
<p>After the words:</p> <p>"I, and the three planes of life, creatures equalling the skies, without exception,</p> <p>From this time on until we gain Enlightenment,</p>	<p>"I, and the sentient beings of the three realms, equal to the limits of space,</p> <p>From now until we gain Awakening,</p>

<p>O', of all the Blissful Ones of the ten directions and three times,</p> <p>The Body, Speech, Mind, Qualities, Action, condensed in one; essence of all the Buddhas,</p> <p>Source of all the Dharma's eighty-four thousand heaps,</p> <p>Great Master of all the Noble Sangha --"</p>	<p>Turn to the Sugatas of the ten directions and three times,</p> <p>With their Body, Speech, Mind, Qualities and Activity, condensed</p> <p>In one embodiment of all Buddhas,</p> <p>Source of eighty-four thousand heaps of Dharma instruction,</p> <p>Great Master of the Sangha of the Noble Ones" (- Avalokitesvara-)</p>
<p>Recite as many times as possible:</p> <p>"To our Gurus, immediate and lineal, in their glorious throngs,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Buddha, our teacher, who has discarded and understood to the end,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Sublime Dharma, his teaching, that consists of authority and understanding,(4)</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Noble Sangha, Buddha-sons who bear the teaching,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind."</p>	<p>Recite as many times as possible:</p> <p>To the glorious gathering of root and lineage teachers</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Buddha, the teacher whose renunciation and realisation is complete,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Noble Dharma of scriptural authority and realisation,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Noble Sangha, Buddha-heirs who inherit the teaching,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind."</p>
<p>Thereafter, make the entreaty as follows:</p> <p>"Best Guru and the threefold precious Jewel, we make obeisance and entreat you: we pray</p> <p>that you transmute the body, speech and mind - all three, of myself and of all sentient beings.</p> <p>Transmute our mind that it go to the Dharma;</p> <p>Transmute us, that we take the sublime Dharma as our path;</p> <p>Transmute our error in the Path, that it be stilled;</p> <p>Transmute erroneous seemings, that they turn to space;</p>	<p>Then pray as follows:</p> <p>"Supreme Teacher and the threefold precious Jewel,</p> <p>We prostrate and pray to you.</p> <p>Please bless my body, speech and mind, and that of all sentient beings.</p> <p>Grant your blessing that our mind turns to the Dharma;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that our Dharma follows the path;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that the Path dissolves our illusion;</p>

<p>Transmute un-Dharmic disquisitions, that they cease;</p> <p>Transmute us that our love (5) and compassion grow;</p> <p>Transmute us that both Bodhicittas(6) be refined;</p> <p>Transmute us that omniscience be swiftly gained."</p>	<p>Grant your blessing that appearances arise as the Dharmadhatu.</p> <p>Grant your blessing that un-Dharmic thoughts do not arise;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that love and compassion do arise;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that both Bodhicittas be mastered;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that we quickly achieve the knowing state."</p>
<p>And recite thrice:</p> <p>"For the sake of all beings, equalling the skies, who have been my mother, I will gain unsurpassable Enlightenment(7).</p> <p>To this purpose shall I practice a yoga profound, path of all the Buddhas.(8)"</p>	<p>And recite three times:</p> <p>"For the sake of all beings, equalling the skies, who have been my mother, I will gain unsurpassable awakening.</p> <p>To this purpose I shall practise this profound yoga,</p> <p>The path of all the Buddhas"</p>
<p>With the following words:</p> <p>OM SVABHAVASUDDAH SARVADHARMAH SVABHAVA SUDDHO 'HAM</p>	<p>(Self visualisation as Avalokitesvara begins here)</p> <p>OM SVABHAVASUDDAH SARVADHARMAH SVABHAVA SUDDHO 'HAM</p>
<p>Out of the state of the great unbounded Dharmadhatu,</p> <p>A throne of jewels granting all kinds of wants:</p> <p>Carpet of lotus unstained by the Round's ills;</p> <p>Disc of a moon, clear light of its very nature; and</p> <p>Thereon Myself: all Buddhas actual in Avalokita,</p> <p>The colour of spotless conch and water crystal,</p> <p>Whose very pleasant smiling face is calm and graceful;</p> <p>Of Four Hands, the first pair's palms joined at his Heart,</p> <p>Whilst those above hold crystal rosary and lotus-jem;</p>	<p>From the limitless dimension of Dharmadhatu,</p> <p>Arises a wish fullfilling jewel throne,</p> <p>A lotus seat unspoiled by samsara's flaws,</p> <p>A moon disc whose nature is illuminating clarity,</p> <p>And on that am I, Avalokitesvara who embodies all Buddhas.</p> <p>The colour of spotless conch and water-crystal,</p> <p>Whose very pleasant smiling face is calm and graceful;</p> <p>And with four hands,</p> <p>The first pair joined together at his heart,</p> <p>The other holding a crystal mala and a lotus with a jewel.</p>

<p>Most fair his Feet, in adamantine posture seated:</p> <p>He is decked with many ravishing silks and jewels,</p> <p>Adorned with tresses and crest-knot of indigo locks.</p> <p>Atop his Head, uniting all Buddhas' jnana, chief of all refuge-places,</p> <p>His essence our guru, form Immeasurable Light, the Family's master</p> <p>sits well pleased in aspect.</p>	<p>He is completely beautiful, seated in vajra posture.</p> <p>Decked with many delightful silks and jewels,</p> <p>Handsome with his indigo locks and top-knot.</p> <p>Above his head, the lord of all sources of refuge,</p> <p>Sits uniting the timeless awareness of all Buddhas,</p> <p>In appearance Amitabha, and in essence our own teacher –</p> <p>Well pleased Lord of the (Lotus) Family.</p>
<p>As forms in a glass, deities in ourselves we image:</p> <p>Image and void conjoined are maya's dance;</p> <p>Dancer-like, divers costumes make him fair:</p> <p>Fair, comely, mirrored image of the mind.</p>	<p>We ourselves, as the body of the deity,</p> <p>Are like the appearance of a reflection in a mirror,</p> <p>Are the dance of illusion, the union of appearance and emptiness.</p> <p>Beautiful like a dancer who appears in many costumes,</p> <p>A pleasing, lovely reflection of the appearances of mind.</p>
<p>Keep your mind on the deity for a little; and then, with single-pointed devotion to the guru above your head, three or more times entreat him earnestly:</p>	<p>So saying this, keep your mind a while on the deity. Then, with wholehearted devotion to the teacher above your head, recite the following.</p>
<p>"Precious Guru, in whom all refuges unite, Bhagavan, Tathagata, Arahata, Truly complete Buddha Measureless Light, I entreat you to think of me with a kindly heart: Transmute our evil works and sin's obscurement, that they be wiped away; Transmute the two stocks(9), that they be swiftly completed; Transmute us that true samadhi be born; Transmute us that we swiftly gain Buddhahood."</p>	<p>Precious teacher, in whom all refuges unite, Bhagavan, Tathagata, Arahata, Truly complete Buddha Measureless Light, Please look upon me with your loving heart, Please grant your blessing so our harmful deeds and veils may be purified. Grant your blessing so both accumulations may be accomplished quickly, Grant your blessing so pure samadhi may arise, Grant your blessing so we may swiftly gain Buddhahood."</p>

<p>And with the words:</p> <p>Dharma that sums bliss, woe, Nirvana, Round, Of Dharmas all the root, is our own mind: Mind's essence scan: in colour, shape it's not - It's not, and so of 'one' and 'more' it's void; Through voidness, from Birth, Cease and Stay it's free. Free, yet clear images cease not; all constructs stilled; The still mind-essence, great without bounds(10), is this. Let go' slackly into a state free from all mental activity.</p>	<p>And with the words:</p> <p>(pointing out instruction spoken by Amitabha)</p> <p>Dharma is what pervades samsara, nirvana, happiness and suffering. And the root of all Dharmas is one's own mind. In mind, there is no colour and no shape. Being no thing by nature, it is empty of 'one' and 'many.' Being empty, it is free of arising, ceasing and dwelling. Being free, it is unceasing clear appearance where all constructs (have) come to rest. This mind of peace is great, unbounded, and free from all extremes. Let go and relax into a state free from all mental activity.</p>
<p>After thinking:</p> <p>"Within my heart, on lotus-moon, the letter HRIH; around Encircled by the mantra of six letters, whence, light-rays Urging the Jina's compassion, may he transmute me; And the welfare of beings in the six classes of life be performed!"</p>	<p>Afterwards:</p> <p>Inside my heart, on a lotus-moon, is the letter HRIH. Around it is the mantra of six letters. Light-rays issue forth urging the Jina's compassion To grant his blessings and perform the welfare of the six kinds of beings.</p>
<p>Recite 500, etc., times: OM MANI PADME HUM</p>	<p>Recite 500, etc., times: OM MANI PADME HUM</p>
<p>And when leaving off the session think of the carpets(11) as turning into the form of rays of light and merging into oneself.</p>	<p>Then, at the end of the session, we think of the seats as turning into rays of light and merging into ourselves.</p>

<p>Make whatever dedications of merit and prayers (12) may be known, such as:</p> <p>By this good act may I and other creatures</p> <p>Meet, in this life, long life, health and Sublime Dharma;</p> <p>And, in the next, being born in the Sukhavati field</p> <p>Swiftly attain the rank of Avalokita!</p> <p>With body, speech and mind never parted from the three identifications</p> <p>of Deity, Mantra, and Jnana,</p> <p>Acting for the welfare of beings by the power of compassion,</p> <p>may we fulfil the course of action of the Jinas' sons!</p> <p>At all occasions, whether Here, the Hereafter, or Between,</p> <p>never let go the hook of compassion,</p> <p>Of the best guide, the Guru Measureless Light,</p> <p>be we preserved from all downfall in life or stillness!"</p>	<p>Next comes the dedication prayer.</p> <p>By this beneficial act may I and other sentient beings</p> <p>Live long, be healthy and endowed with the noble Dharma,</p> <p>And in the future be born in the land of Sukhavati,</p> <p>To quickly attain the state of mighty Avalokitesvara.</p> <p>Carrying continuously on the path the understanding</p> <p>That in essence our ordinary body, speech and mind</p> <p>Are Avalokitesvara's form, mantra and timeless awareness,</p> <p>Acting for the welfare of beings by the power of compassion,</p> <p>May we accomplish all the activities of the Bodhisattvas.</p> <p>In all occasions, whether in this life, future lives, or in the Bardo,</p> <p>May we never let go the hook of compassion,</p> <p>Of the best teacher, the Protector Amitabha,</p> <p>And be preserved from the shortcomings of cyclic existence and of (one sided) nirvana.</p>
<p>Think at all times of the dwelling-place as the Field of Sukhavati; and of oneself as waiting, with the pride of Avalokita, upon the guru, Immeasurable Light; and through not parting with the three Identifications of body, speech and mind learn to fulfil with Great compassion the welfare of beings.</p>	<p>Think at all times of the place where you are staying as the Field of Sukhavati; and of yourself as waiting, with the self-assurance of Avalokita, upon the teacher, Immeasurable Light. And through not parting with the three integrations (Skt?) (khyer so sum) of body, speech and mind learn to fulfil with great Compassion the welfare of beings.</p>
<p>In view of his being urged from a great distance by his own disciple, Gragspa rGyal-mTshan, that a sadhana of Mahakarunika, done into verse, was needed, the Reverend(13) dKon-mChog Lhun-grub very quickly wrote at E-vam chos-ldan, and sent to the Eastern region of mDo-khams, this spiritual practice of Mahakarunika and the Mahamudra conjointly,</p>	<p>In view of his being urged from a great distance by his own disciple, Gragspa rGyal-mTshan, that a sadhana of Mahakarunika, done into verse, was needed, the monk dKon-mChog Lhun-grub very quickly wrote at E-vam Chos-ldan, and sent to the Eastern region of mDo-khams, this spiritual practice of Mahakarunika and the Mahamudra</p>

<p>Doctrine of the glorious Sa-skyapa, 'father' and 'son'.</p>	<p>conjointly, Doctrine of the glorious Sa-skyapa father-son lineage.</p>
<p>Mangalam</p>	<p>Sarva Mangalam</p>
<p>Notes</p> <p>(in above text by John Driver, translator)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mahakarunika (Avalokita) represents the phase of 'Generation' (bsKyed-rim: utpada-krama), and the Mahamudra that of 'Completion' (rDzogs-rim: sampanna-krama), the two phases of tantric meditation here practiced in conjunction (yuganaddha). 2. A guru of the Sa-skyapa school. 3. This contains a reference to the author's guru, dKon-mChog 'Phel, whose name (which the Sanskrit translates) appears in the lineage of this practice, below. 4. The basic division of the Dharma, adopted generally by Tibetan authors, into lun (agama, scriptural authority), the texts in which it is embodied, and rTogs, (samaya, full understanding or comprehension), the realisation it represents. 5. Maitri. 6. cf. Bodhicaryavatara 1.15: Tad bodhicittam dvididham vijnatavyam samasatah bodhipranidhicittam ca bodhiprasthanam eve ca and notes 7 & 8 below. 7. This line (two in Tibetan) expresses the first bodhicitta, that of aspiration. 8. This line (two in Tibetan) expresses the second bodhicitta, that of entering the path. 9. of merit (punya) and spirituality (jnana) 10. i.e. free from the 'extremes' of conceptual elaboration: without birth or cessation, permanence or annihilation, coming or going, difference or identity. 11. the throne, lotus, moon etc., on which, as Avalokita, one is conceived as sitting. 	

<p>12. aspirations (as distinguished from petitions, translated here 'entreaties').</p> <p>13. bTsun-pa (bhadanta).</p> <p>14. punya - rupakaya (nirmana, sambhoga); jnana - arupakaya (dharmakaya)□</p>	
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Part Three: Mahakarunika Sadhana Commentary

(From Tillman Lhundrup. This part of the Mahakarunika Sadhana was not included in the text given to Sangharakshita)

This text explains how to put into practice the compassionate Mahakarunika and Mahamudra in union.

OM SVASTI SIDDHI.

I prostrate to the Lama and to the Three Jewels.

First settle yourself with crossed legs on a comfortable seat. Then take refuge in the Lama; take refuge in the Buddha; take refuge in the Dharma; take refuge in the Sangha.

Go for refuge In this way three times. Then continue, saying:

I will obtain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. And for this purpose, I will practice the profound absorption of training in Bodhicitta.

Next comes OM SVABHAVASUDDHA SARVADHARMA SVABHAVASUDDHO 'HAM. Having recited this, my own body beyond reference points becomes emptiness, and is thus meditated as being pure.

From there I myself, in one instant, arise on a jewel throne with a lotus and moon seat, as the Great Compassionate One with a white body, one face, and four arms. The first two arms are joined in anjali (i.e. the palms put together in front of the heart), enjoining all Buddhas to accomplish the benefit of sentient beings. The right lower hand is holding a white mala, and the left lower one a lotus with a jewel.

I am adorned with a diadem of jewels, with earrings, necklaces and all ornaments, and dressed in garments of multicoloured silk. From my body emanate measureless light rays which perform the benefit of sentient beings.

On the top of my head as the crown ornament is Amitabha, who is the very nature of the timeless awareness of all Buddhas united into one.

(Mahakarunika) should be meditated as like the reflection in a mirror, as being without self nature: this is how we should establish awareness of him in our mind.

Having visualised Amitabha on our head, we then pray to the Bhagavan, Tathagata, Arahata - to the Samyak Sambuddha Amitayus - to purify all our negativities and veils, and to quickly increase the accumulation of merit and awareness. (We pray) for him to grant his blessing so that the pure authentic samadhi will arise in our mindstream, and that we will obtain quickly the state of actual completion (perfection). We pray three times like this from the bottom of our heart.

Then we develop the understanding that our own mind is the root of all happiness and suffering, samsara and nirvana; and that nevertheless this mind, if we analyse it, does not exist as something with a colour or a shape. It is neither one or many; by nature it is empty. Having this non-existent nature, it is from time without beginning unborn. What we call its continuity is also empty. Because of its being unborn, it is empty from the beginning. Because of being unborn it also does not reside anywhere, and it is not dwelling anywhere in between either; due to this it is also said to be empty. Since it is neither dwelling or moving as something, then it is indestructible. And finally this is why we say it has no end. (i.e. it is also empty because it has no cessation).

Being empty of essence it is unborn, so it has no beginning. Since it is unborn it doesn't stay anywhere, so it is empty of dwelling. Since it is not dwelling anywhere it cannot also be called moving, and that's also why it cannot be destroyed. So it has no cessation. All of these are the reasons why it is called empty. It has no foundations and no root. And it is beyond all elaborations, that's why we say it is like the sky. And being like the sky it cuts through all elaborations. (The sky is where our elaborations stop, because you have no reference points)

It is beyond words and concepts – we cannot meditate on it using words and concepts. It is not constructed by mind. It is a state of simplicity; and understanding this we should rest our mind in complete relaxation.

Then after that, in order to train ourselves in this understanding:

Don't let your mind elaborate. Dwell within – dwell inside for as long as this (understanding) arises, and then in your own heart meditate both the letter HRIH and the mantra garland as being of light. From that, light emanates which stimulates the Compassion of all the Buddhas. Due to this we ourselves receive the blessing, while the benefit of beings is also accomplished. Meditating on that, recite as much as you can OM MANI PEME HUM.

When you have finished that recitation, dedicate the roots of virtue to obtaining Buddhahood. Then when you enter into activity, imagine the place where you live as being Devachen and yourself as being the servant of the Bhagavan, the protector Amitayus – yourself being actually the Jowo Mahakarunika, the Great Compassionate one, having the self-assurance or pride of being the Lord Mahakarunika. Once you have generated that kind of feeling or attitude, then never be separated from it in your daily activities. If you constantly practise like that, in this life you will live long and all obstacles to your practice will be pacified (overcome). In your next life you will be born in Devachen and will quickly accomplish the actual manifest complete state and the practice of Awakening.

So this is the way to practise the union of Great Compassion and Mahamudra. It comes from the profound oral instructions of the noble Sakyapas, whose student (Motom Sagye Jupur..?) made prayers to me (the author) in the year of the Male Fire Dog, in the fourth month, on the eighth day. Then I wrote down this text.

Comments on the Mahakarunika and Mahamudra Sadhana

From the Mahakarunika Sadhana led by Kamalashila, 10-16 April 2020

Part One: The Lineage Prayer

When we meditate on Avalokiteśvara, what is the archetype that we are invoking, the spirit of this yidam? Just bring to mind the image. He is sitting there with piled up hair on his head. Somewhere in the background in almost every thangka that you see are the Himalayas. Over his shoulder he is wearing the skin of a deer. He is holding a jewel, a Lotus with another jewel in it, and a string of Mala beads.



The Siva Statue in Siva Temple at Bangalore



Figure 7. Matsyendra, Mangalore Museum.



Figure 5. Lokesvara, Mañjunātha temple, Kadri.

What does all this convey? Not, I think, that Avalokiteśvara is a charity worker. He is a meditator. With his deer skin and piled up hair he is more like a cave dwelling ascetic, a practitioner like Milarepa. In fact the image may be linked to that of Shiva, who looks a little similar.

I think there is some historical crossover of this figure with various Hindu deities perhaps around the time of the Mahasiddhas.* There are statues of figures that are clearly Avalokiteśvara with Amitabha in his crown which are nowadays worshipped as Hindu deities like Vishnu, and also a character called Matsyendranath. I find the connection with the Mahasiddhas evocative, because they continue the

ancient tradition of the Śramanas, the Wanderers, the freely associating network of renunciates out of which gathered the original Sangha in the time of the Buddha. It was they who transmitted the oral tradition after his death, and

* I'm grateful to Anandajyoti for some of this information.

since there were many lay practitioners in the Buddha's day, they may have done so independently of the monastic traditions of Buddhism over the first few centuries CE, through the late Mahayana period to be received into the Tibetan traditions, which nowadays largely preserve both institutionalised and non-institutionalised and fully developed teachings of the Buddha. That's a bit of a personal interest and I know, quite a bit of guesswork, but for me at least, Avalokiteśvara has this Mahasiddha, Milarepa like quality.

Despite being the Bodhisattva most associated with Compassion, and as Mahakarunika even named 'the Greatly Compassionate one,' as an archetype Avalokiteśvara is not portrayed as a hero helping suffering people in the world; his approach to compassion is yogic. But how can it be yogic? We may find that very idea problematic. In Triratna we tend to stress active help for others and in dharma centres in India where that approach is especially emphasised we see walking rather than seated Buddhas. Naturally, then, we may associate compassion with helping the hungry and disadvantaged. Charity work is obviously a good thing, and Avalokiteśvara inspires charity and generosity, but that is not indicated in Avalokiteśvara's four-armed form.

Avalokiteśvara is more about the principle of compassion, the nature of compassion, the energy that inspires it. We can consider those famous lines from the White Lotus Sutra, spoken by the Bodhisattva Aksayamati. There is not a word about actually going out and doing anything!

O you, whose eyes are clear, whose eyes are friendly,
Whose eyes betray distinguished wisdom-knowledge;
Whose eyes are pitiful, whose eyes are pure,
O you, so loveable, with beautiful face, with beautiful eyes!
Your lustre is spotless and immaculate,
Your knowledge without darkness, your splendour like the sun.
Radiant like the blaze of a fire not disturbed by the wind,
Warming the world you shine splendidly.
Eminent in your pity, friendly in your words,
One great mass of fine virtues and friendly thoughts,
You appease the fire of the defilements which burn beings,
And you rain down the rain of the deathless Dharma.
In quarrels, disputes, and in strife,
In the battles of men and in any great danger,
To recollect the name of Avalokiteśvara
Will appease the troops of evil foes.
His voice is like that of a cloud or drum;
Like a rain-cloud he thunders, sweet in voice like Brahma.
His voice is the most perfect that can be.
So one should recall Avalokiteśvara.
Think of him, think of him, without hesitation,
Of Avalokiteśvara, that pure being.
In death, disaster, and calamity
He is the saviour, refuge and recourse.
As he who has reached perfection in all virtues,

Who looks on all beings with pity and friendliness,
Who is virtue itself, a great ocean of virtues,
As such Avalokiteśvara is worthy of adoration.
He who is now so compassionate to the world.
He will a Buddha be in future ages.
Humbly I bow to Avalokiteśvara
Who destroys all sorrow, fear and suffering.

We can also see this in the Buddha's own approach to compassion. He was indeed helpful and friendly, and famously helped wash a bhikkhu suffering from dysentery, which suggests that he was happy to perform compassionate action in the real world. But the Buddha's compassion was expressed mainly in his teaching of the Dharma, and that for him, was the highest form of compassion. He often said things like "I have taught you this out of compassion" – including when that was something they may not have wanted to hear!

And there is good reason for considering dharma teaching the highest form of compassion: the Dharma is the only way anyone will ever really free themselves from suffering, from dukkha. The Buddha's wish was that others would be free not simply from suffering, since that is impossible, but from dukkha or the added-on suffering of reactivity, and he focused on empowering them to do so. That is how he taught out of compassion for the world.

It is interesting that Pali accounts of the Brahmaviharas do not use the method of self, friend, neutral person, or the language of near- or far enemies. The Buddha's method of doing *karunabhavana* was simply to radiate the quality of *karuna*. Bhikku Analayo has written a ground breaking book about this, called "Compassion and Emptiness," where he explores compassion (as well as what I've said already about its nature), in relation to the teaching of emptiness, and especially regarding this radiation of compassion. When you take into account the emptiness of self-nature in all things, it adds a vastness to the radiation of compassion. Compassion penetrates beyond all that is conceivable, beyond all our ideas, visualisations or imaginations of space, time, and identity. This vastness of scope that can result from the application of emptiness makes the practice rather similar to the Bodhicitta practice. Analayo's book effectively makes a bridge to a Mahayana approach to the brahmaviharas along with a way of imagining the emptiness of self-nature in everything.

So it is in this kind of way, it seems to me, that Avalokiteśvara is a yogic figure, meditating with compassion in his heart for all beings without exception.

In order to radiate compassion one must be able to connect to it first. Compassion is an uncommon emotion. Both energetically and in principle, Compassion means wishing others to be free of dukkha, wishing that in all

things, in all behaviour and thoughts. It is a wish, a volition that depends on some degree of penetration of insight into dukkha. One has to know something from experience as to why ‘the ending of dukkha’ is the main goal of Buddhist practice. Compassion is a quality likely also to be expressed in action in the world, but the volition alone will affect all our thoughts and the subtlest of actions, so it is very justifiable that in meditation we work simply with the volition.

Having clarified the nature of the quality Mahakarunika embodies, let’s look at the sadhana. We’ll look at it in both the translations we have. Tonight we will have time only to go into the outline.

So with the translations, there is the original one Sangharakshita had done in Kalimpong by John Driver. Then there’s one by Tillman Lhundrup, who is German and I had got to know around 2005 through the European Buddhist Union teachers meetings, that’s how he later got to know Vessantara and even later did a couple of events for Order members on Mahamudra at Madhyamaloka. I went and stayed with him in France and we did this translation over a few days, him doing the actual translation from the Tibetan; all I could do was explain some of the nuances of Driver’s English, which sometimes weren’t apparent even to a polyglot like Tillman. I asked him because I’d wondered how accurate Driver’s very flowery translation actually was. Happily it seems it was very accurate, however he did not always spot the underlying Mahamudra pointers that are surely essential to a text entitled ‘The Mahakarunika and Mahamudra Conjoint Sadhana’ and which can potentially function as an effective introduction to Mahamudra.

There are three parts, a prayer to the lineage of the practice, the actual sadhana, and what’s called the Je Nang, the explanation. Both translations are of the same sadhana, the one we practise in the Triratna Order. It comes originally from the Sakyapa tradition via the Rimé teacher Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, to Sangharakshita, and from him to us, and also to practitioners in Lama Tillman’s Kagyu tradition. For some reason the explanation section was not translated to John Driver; possibly he made a decision not to include it.

If you compare the different parts of the practice we Order members received, the order is different. In Driver’s version the lineage entreaty is placed at the end of the sadhana as though it were an interesting reference document giving information about the lineage. However the traditional approach is to call on the lineage before the practice, so the power associated with all our lineal ancestors supports us.

So the Lineage Prayer comes first. Reading through it:-

Namo Guru-Lokesvara Ya

This is a call to Avalokiteśvara as the guru.

To the Lord of the Ten Powers, Pinnacle of the Sakyas; dGra-las rNam-rGyal; rDo-rje gdan-pa; and Ba-ri locava; Sa-chen bSod-nams rTse; rje-bTsun grags-pa; to these I pray.

To the great pandit of Sa-sKya, Tshogs-sgom nyan-chen- po; bSod-nams sKyabs; gZuns-dPal dPal-tshul-ba (The Dharma Master of the great East,)

Sar-chen chos-rje; Ngor chan dorje chang; To all these great Bodhisattvas I pray.

I recognise the name Bari Lotsawa, he's an early teacher in the Sakyapa school.

Then

Kun-mKhyen chen-po; Yongs'dzin dKon-mchog 'Phel; Lha-mChog Sans-rGyas Sen-ge; Nam-mKha'i mTshan; dPal-lDan Don-grub; Shes-rab 'Byun-gNas; and Kun-dGa' Legs-pa, to these I pray.

San-rGyas Phun-tshogs; bsTan-'dzin Lhun-grub; Nam-mKha' bSam-grub; Sa-chen Kun-dga'; Nag-dbang Shes-rab-Rin-chen grags-pa; and Chos-kyi rGyal-mTshan (Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro); to these I pray.

And to Urgyen Sangharakshita, too, we pray.

So that is the complete lineage; Tillman has put Sangharakshita in there.

And then a verse:

To the supreme Arya Padmapani
In whose single form the combined heaps of compassion are gathered
Of the entire vast host of Buddhas and their Sons,
To those who are endowed with his play
My root and lineage teachers, I pray.

Then comes this prayer to Avalokiteśvara as Padmapani, who is the aboriginal standing form, the same form as you find around the stupas at Bhaja caves in India for example. That figure is really early, not too much later than the Buddha himself, and you get the Buddha, or something representing the

Buddha, maybe a parasol, with Vajrapani and Padmapani as kind of expressions of his wisdom and compassion. And there's this characterisation of Padmapani's activity as 'play.' That is, what he does is never heavy handed and clumsy, it is natural and joyful, and exploratory rather than dictatorial. So this feels quite important: Padmapani illustrates something about the quality of compassion in this expression 'play'. It is not only the volition that others may get free from dukkha, which may easily come across as perhaps narrowly religious. However the awakened mind is never like that; the volition is communicative and even playful. It extends itself in a human way, it engages and is happy to interact.

The lineage prayer calls upon Padmapani again at the end here because his spirit of play is expressed in all these ancestral teachers' lives and examples.

And then,

By the blessing of this prayer,
In all lives may we be cared for by the best spiritual friend,
Be aroused by renunciation that is non-artificial and strong,
And inspired (blessed) to master the Bodhicitta of aspiration and application.
In particular: From the two accumulations, may the noble Kayas be born;
The union of appearance and emptiness show clear as the moon in water;
And the blessed nectar of our protector teacher, the family master Measureless
Light, enter our heart.

Here is the actual prayer to the lineage: that we find good spiritual friends, and that the way we renounce samsaric things is natural, not artificial or contrived. The ideal of uncontrived naturalness – the fully embodied truth – is typical of Mahamudra literature. In that spirit we aspire to practice fully, realising Bodhicitta and applying it in all we do. We pray that by continuing to cultivate the accumulating qualities of merit and wisdom we become fully awakened. In this way the noble kayas (rupakaya and dharmakaya) will be actualised.

The wish is that as we naturally progress out of samsaric involvement, the union of appearance and emptiness will 'show clear as the moon in water.' This is the beautiful classic simile in which our perception of the reflection of the moon is perceived as such (despite it not being the actual moon) just as the things of the world appear to us as such (despite their being empty of the self-nature we endow them with.)

All of this prayer, which we would naturally consider to be radiating out *from* us to the Buddhas, is simultaneously imagined as the lineage of awakening coming *from* Amitabha and flowing like nectar *into* our heart.

Next comes a pithy summary of the prayer that refers, in the language of Mahamudra, to the practice's central realisation. (Lama Tillman had some reservation about the bracketed line but let John Driver's version stand.)

In this way may the root of all dharmas, our own mind,
Which is naturalness beyond expression, the ultimate supreme Arya
(Beyond the elaborations of birth, cessation and abiding?),
Be actually seen and then maintained forever.

This is in the same language as the pointing out instruction that comes in the main sadhana (as we'll see – and as we can also apply in the sadhana as we do it in our own practice.)

Then:

As I arise may the light of mantra garlands which circles the HRIH, vitality of his heart,
Accomplish the two benefits,
And bless my mindstream by melting into my heart,
May I perfect the yoga of recitation, sound and emptiness.

The last line here, 'the yoga of recitation, sound and emptiness' offers an integrated method of approaching mantra recitation connected with insight practice that can also be used separately outside the sadhana practice.

Finally there is this prayer with Tillman suggesting in the first line some alternative ways we can apprehend the vision of Amitabha, applicable I think the sadhana generally.

In short, may I always know the guru protector Measureless Light, (meditate, see, feel)
As inseparable from the lotus at the top of my head,

And may appearances, sounds and awareness arise only
As the pure play of deity, mantra, and timeless awareness.
Through the power of complete dedication to the heart of Enlightenment
May all beings cross over the ocean of existences
And quickly obtain the state of mighty Avalokiteśvara.

In those words did ‘Jam-dbYan mKhyen-brTse’i dBan-po, the bhikshu in the tradition of Shakyamuni, through the kindness of Vajradhara nag-dBan Legs-grub from the oral lineage of the ocean of teachings, receive this and write it down.

May accomplishment arise!

The final wish is for Amitabha to remain above as our inspiration, and it also makes a very helpful connection between appearances, meaning in this case whatever appears in our visual field, and the visualised deity Avalokiteśvara; between whatever sounds are heard in our ears and the mantra; and between whatever arises in awareness and jnana (wisdom, called here ‘timeless awareness’)

This connection is very interesting and we’ll call upon it when we get more into the sadhana tomorrow. And finally the prayer applied to the whole of existence, mirroring the bodhicitta-mantra at the heart of Mahakarunika:

Through the power of complete dedication to the heart of Enlightenment may all beings cross over the ocean of existence and quickly obtain the state of Mighty Avalokiteśvara.

Mighty Avalokiteśvara. I could comment on that, but I think I’ve said enough.

Part Two: The Main Practice

Yesterday I went through the first part of the Mahakarunika Sadhana, the lineage entreaty. Today we will go into the second part which is the main practice. I'm going to use the John Driver translation because that's the one that's familiar to us all. But I will sometimes use Tillman's as a comparison, especially since now and again he has a better sense of the meaning from the Mahamudra point of view. I know John Driver's words by heart and I imagine a lot of you do; the language has established itself in our minds over so many years of practising.

Something that is obscured by our document with side-by-side translations is the way John Driver begins straight in with the main practice and places the lineage entreaty at the end as though it were a footnote. But calling on the lineage is actually a key element in the sadhana. It is a formal litany with names we may not be able to pronounce, let alone relate to personally, so for daily practice it is acceptable to leave it out. In the opening verses of the main practice there is a reference to the lineage and another lineage prayer, so we will make the connection anyway. But even though we may skip the names of the lineage prayer, we should sometimes evoke the presence of the sadhana's ancestors to bring a kind of life to the sadhana. It will enhance the richness of our practice to find out more about the figures and their stories, and on special occasions perform the lineage prayer with them in mind.

The main part of the sadhana now begins.

<i>Translation by John Driver</i>	<i>Translation by Tillman Lhundrup</i>
<p>(2) The Spiritual Practice of Mahakarunika⁽¹⁾ and Mahamudra Conjointly</p> <p>composed by the All-knowing dKhon-mChog Lhun-grub.⁽²⁾</p>	<p>(2) The Spiritual Practice of Mahakarunika and Mahamudra</p> <p>How to practise the Great Compassionate One and Mahamudra in Union</p> <p>composed by Khun-khyen dKhon-mChog Lhun-grub</p>
NAMO GURU RATNAVARDHAYA ⁽³⁾	NAMO GURU RATNAVARDHAYA
After the words:	"I, and the sentient beings of the three realms, equal to the limits of space,

<p>"I, and the three planes of life, creatures equalling the skies, without exception,</p> <p>From this time on until we gain Enlightenment,</p> <p>O', of all the Blissful Ones of the ten directions and three times,</p> <p>The Body, Speech, Mind, Qualities, Action, condensed in one; essence of all the Buddhas,</p> <p>Source of all the Dharma's eighty-four thousand heaps,</p> <p>Great Master of all the Noble Sangha --"</p>	<p>From now until we gain Awakening,</p> <p>Turn to the Sugatas of the ten directions and three times,</p> <p>With their Body, Speech, Mind, Qualities and Activity, condensed</p> <p>In one embodiment of all Buddhas,</p> <p>Source of eighty-four thousand heaps of Dharma instruction,</p> <p>Great Master of the Sangha of the Noble Ones" (- Avalokitesvara-)</p>
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Namo Guru Ratnavardhaya Ratnavardhaya may have been the teacher of the composer of the sadhana; you could insert 'Sangharakshita' instead if you wanted, or the name of a respected teacher.

Here we call to mind the vast scope of the sadhana: we practice on behalf of the totality of all beings, calling to mind Avalokitesvara who embodies all Buddha qualities, whose *mahakaruna* is the source of the entire dharma and guiding principle for the sangha of all those who have awakened. The 'qualities' and 'activity' of an awakened being are later additions to the more basic list of body, speech and mind.

The missing name indicated by the final dash is Avalokitesvara who we now place centre stage in our awareness, setting him up as we might during the 'worship' section in the sevenfold puja.

Then comes another prayer to the lineage of our tradition (as distinct from the lineage of practitioners of this sadhana), as we come for refuge to our teacher, his dharma ancestors and the three jewels:

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<p>Recite as many times as possible:</p> <p>"To our Gurus, immediate and lineal, in their glorious throngs,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Buddha, our teacher, who has discarded and understood to the end,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Sublime Dharma, his teaching, that consists of authority and understanding, (4)</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Noble Sangha, Buddha-sons who bear the teaching,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind."</p>	<p>Recite as many times as possible:</p> <p>To the glorious gathering of root and lineage teachers</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Buddha, the teacher whose renunciation and realisation is complete,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Noble Dharma of scriptural authority and realisation,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind.</p> <p>To the Noble Sangha, Buddha-heirs who inherit the teaching,</p> <p>We come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind."</p>
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To our gurus, immediate and lineal, in their glorious thrones, we come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind. Here what comes to mind is the visualisation of ascending mandalas of previous teachers in the guru yoga or kalyanamitra yoga.

To the sublime Dharma, his teaching, that consists of authority and understanding (4), we come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind. ‘Authority and Understanding,’ as Driver’s note 4 explains, refers to *The basic division of the Dharma, adopted generally by Tibetan authors, into lun (agama, scriptural authority), the texts in which it is embodied, and rTogs, (samaya, full understanding or comprehension), the realisation it represents.* Tillman has, and I think it is nicer, ‘scriptural authority and realisation.’ Scripture commands a certain respect simply because it may be closer to what the Buddha actually taught. But whatever the words of the suttas and sutras, understanding and realising them are what is truly important.

And to the noble Sangha, Buddha-sons who bear the teaching, we come for refuge with great reverence of body, speech and mind. ‘Buddha-sons’ here is too narrow, since it means not just the male disciples but the entire lineage of the Buddha. Tillman has ‘heirs of the Buddha’ which is more helpful.

<p>Thereafter, make the entreaty as follows:</p> <p>"Best Guru and the threefold precious Jewel, we make obeisance and entreat you: we pray that you transmute the body, speech and mind - all three, of myself and of all sentient beings.</p> <p>Transmute our mind that it go to the Dharma;</p> <p>Transmute us, that we take the sublime Dharma as our path;</p> <p>Transmute our error in the Path, that it be stilled;</p> <p>Transmute erroneous seemings, that they turn to space;</p> <p>Transmute un-Dharmic disquisitions, that they cease;</p> <p>Transmute us that our love (5) and compassion grow;</p> <p>Transmute us that both Bodhicittas(6) be refined;</p> <p>Transmute us that omniscience be swiftly gained."</p>	<p>Then pray as follows:</p> <p>"Supreme Teacher and the threefold precious Jewel,</p> <p>We prostrate and pray to you.</p> <p>Please bless my body, speech and mind, and that of all sentient beings.</p> <p>Grant your blessing that our mind turns to the Dharma;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that our Dharma follows the path;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that the Path dissolves our illusion;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that appearances arise as the Dharmadhatu.</p> <p>Grant your blessing that un-Dharmic thoughts do not arise;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that love and compassion do arise;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that both Bodhicittas be mastered;</p> <p>Grant your blessing that we quickly achieve the knowing state."</p>
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Best guru and the threefold precious jewel is addressing the teacher.

But I think Tillman has the meaning better here. It's a more specific progression than Driver's translation brings out.

Supreme Teacher and the threefold precious jewel, we prostrate and pray to you. Please bless my body, speech and mind and that of all sentient beings. Grant your blessing that our mind turns to the Dharma. Grant your blessing that our Dharma follows the path. In other words, we want to give attention to the Dharma at all times, and we also want our Dharma (in the sense of our dharma practice) to actually follow the path, to be something we're transformed by.

Grant your blessing that the path dissolves our illusion. And this path we follow we want to be a real one, one that actually works, that actually changes us and dissolves our illusions.

Grant your blessing that appearances arise as the Dharmadhatu. This is a Mahamudra style of reference. We pray that we will come to see that what arises in our experience, as well as being just a particular appearance (as for example our computer screen) also relates to ultimate reality. That it is also, in a sense, ultimate reality. The important thing is our view, how we're seeing it. You could even say, grant your blessing that appearances arise as appearances, appearances in which there's more to that appearance than we generally believe or have time to see as it is. So we pray that *appearances*, and the author puts it in an extremely aspirational way, *arise as the Dharmadhatu*, as ultimate reality as that appears to an awakened person.

Grant your blessing that undharmic thoughts do not arise; Grant your blessing that love and compassion do arise; Grant your blessing that both bodhicittas be mastered; grant your blessing that we quickly achieve the knowing state.

Going backwards here:

Grant your blessing that we quickly achieve the knowing state. In other words that we achieve jnana or wisdom.

Grant your blessing that both bodhicittas be mastered. Bodhicitta is a Mahayana conception of awakening. It is the same awakening Sakyamuni Buddha realised and taught as the goal of Buddhist practice, but in the later Mahayana phase of expressing the dharma there is an emphasis on cultivating an altruistic motive of awakening for the sake of all beings. There is also an emphasis on the non-difference between ourselves and others.

Both bodhicittas: the two are, first aspiring to realising bodhicitta and second, actually realising it.

I was asked why we need to develop both bodhicittas if there is just 'one bodhicitta' as Sangharakshita has explained it. One answer is that the two bodhicittas actually refer to a single realisation, realised and unrealised.

But Sangharakshita's idea focuses more on the nature of the Bodhicitta. He says this is impersonal, i.e. the nature of the Bodhicitta experience is such that we don't see it as ours: it has the quality of anatta, non self. Even the arising bodhicitta that manifests in intimations, momentary flashes of insight and openings of the heart that tell us we are moving on the path to awakening, he calls 'supra-individual' in nature, because those manifestations somehow transcend us, are more than us, as individuals. As a particular experience, bodhicitta can arise only to the individual, of course. At the same time it can be collectively aspired to, and is quite likely to arise collectively too, within a group of aspirants, each of whom will have their own particular experience of it.

Hence Sangharakshita has spoken of there being ‘one Bodhicitta’ that individuals participate in.

What is being referenced in the sadhana as the two Bodhicittas is however simply (1) the aspiration for awakening, and (2) the full realisation of it as actual awakening.

To give an example, we may be developing love and kindness, progressing ethically, but still we may have a very strong view of ‘me’ as existing in a very literal way: there is a ‘me’ that can be literally hurt, a ‘me’ that will literally get something or other, a ‘me’ who is good, kind and ethical. When a certain degree of realization comes, that view melts a bit, we realise it’s not exactly like that, and from that point the world is experienced a little differently. There is a new sense of freedom; we still often do relate in the old way, but something has shifted. This would be an example of the aspiring, or the relative, bodhicitta.

Grant your blessing that our mind turns to the Dharma;

Grant your blessing that our Dharma follows the path;

Grant your blessing that the Path dissolves our illusion;

Grant your blessing that appearances arise as the Dharmadhatu.

Grant your blessing that un-Dharmic thoughts do not arise;

Grant your blessing that love and compassion do arise;

Grant your blessing that both Bodhicittas be mastered;

Grant your blessing that we quickly achieve the knowing state.

So overall, it’s just quite a nice neat little sequence here. We want our mind to turn to the Dharma. We want that Dharma, now seeing it as our practice, to be one that follows the path. And the path we follow, we want it to work – that is to dissolve our illusion. One sign of that, you could say, is that we start to see things a bit differently: appearances arise as the Dharmadhatu, as part of the overall reality characterized by emptiness or pratyasamutpada. And then there’s an appeal to ethical practice: we wish for un-dharmic thoughts no longer to arise, for love and compassion to arise and that, overall we shall be working on both bodhicittas. That essentially means that we will be practicing the dharma for the sake of everyone’s awakening with the realisation of ultimate reality, the Bodhicitta, as our ultimate aim.

We may, though, be wondering, what is all this about? Who is going to bestow these blessings and how could these blessings actually come about?

Personally, I do this and it's meaningful to me. But I don't really know why and I'm not sure I can explain it to you. I don't literally think there is a little line of people up there receiving my prayers and saying, oh yes, we'll give him some blessings now he's asked for them. But I do find that doing this has a really good effect. It seems important to ask – to make a prayer. As in life sometimes, if you don't ask, you don't get. Or it's like a spell: if you formulate your wish in a ritual way like this, it modifies the universe somehow, making it more likely that our wish will come true or our prayer will be answered.

That's what I find. Also, connecting with the lineage of practitioners of the past gives power to the request. We are joining the lineage ourselves in doing the practice. All these others have done this practice before us and become enlightened through it; that is an extraordinary thought. Indeed, it's incredibly encouraging. It brings about an openness in my heart, and connects me to the heart-wishes of all those very admirable practitioners.

Padmapani said, 'I was reflecting on what you were saying. When I do the sadhana, I not only think about the blessing from Bhante at my ordination, but it goes back and I have visionary images of Jamyang Khentse Chokyi Lodro as well. So I get the impression there's a kind of charge that's been given to us which goes back which actually helps generate this practice.' Yes, I said, this relates to the lineage; it's certainly something that can happen in meditation. As though these practitioners somehow live within the sadhana's inner world. I've had experiences like that myself with the Mañjughosa practice, but not this one.

The spirit of making the prayer is not one of working yourself up in a kind of fervour of devotion, as though you were shaking a bottle of champagne to make it froth and pop. It is about clarity, concentration and refinement in the practice of Mahakarunika. You know you want your mind to turn to the Dharma and everything that flows out of that. You're clarifying what you really want. You make really clear, through the prayer, the volition to realise compassion like Avalokitesvara did and to become, eventually, just like Avalokitesvara. So repeating the prayer in your sadhana practice is going to concentrate, refine and direct that wish so that is far more likely to happen just like that.

So the next section is making the Bodhisattva Vow. Having made those clarifications in your mind and your heart through the lineage prayer, we recite three times these verses:

And recite thrice:

"For the sake of all beings, equalling the skies, who have been my mother, I will gain unsurpassable Enlightenment(7).

To this purpose shall I practice a yoga profound, path of all the Buddhas.(8)"

This is another prayer, this time in a spirit of determining and committing to awakening. I find these lines incredibly galvanizing and inspiring. I really get behind them when I recite them.

One should avoid getting stuck in the literal mind here wondering, hang on, have all these people really been my mother? The point is that we are actually connected to all beings. Whether directly or indirectly, whether large or hardly perceptible ways, what they all do affects us and what we do affects all of them. So this verse is a way to feel such empathy with all beings that they might as well be your actual relation. I very much like the Native American phrase, which I have heard in prayers during sweat lodge ceremonies: “All my relations.” That refers to all beings who are my relations. All my relations are connected to this ceremony, and also the sadhana. It isn’t just all beings’ existence, it’s the living bond of connection that we share. So this verse also touches on a reflection about the conditionality and the inseparability of all things.

For the sake of all beings equalling the skies, who have been my mother, I will gain unsurpassable enlightenment. To this purpose shall I practice a yoga profound, path of all the Buddhas.

Someone said, ‘bringing my own mother to mind, with the qualities that come into my mind when I think about her, there’s a huge amount of gratitude for everything she’s done for me, including even for me to be able to come into being in the first place, let alone be healthy and happy, and I feel I want to give her back the very best I can. These thoughts bring my whole emotional world into the practice.’

I said, ‘when I think of my long deceased parents the impression is of them being vulnerable and also somehow deluded in a certain way. I don’t mean I view my parents as particularly ignorant, it’s just there’s so much about life that people don’t understand that lead them into all sorts of worries and anxieties. That is true of me and everyone.’ To me this verse highlights Avalokitesvara’s desire to empower people to free themselves from entanglement in things that don’t conduce to awakening. That’s his real speciality.

So you do this in the practice. You let yourself get inspired by this bodhicitta verse, it’s almost like it shoots forth the arrow of your desire and makes you say ‘Right, I’m going to do this! I’m going to practice this yoga, this profound yoga, this path which is the same path that all the Buddhas have followed!

So that kind of sets you up for the next bit of the visualization. But you just don’t go straight into the visualization. You can’t really do it properly without the

dissolution into sunyata: recalling the truth that all this is empty of self-nature, it is all praitiyasamutpada, all insubstantial.

So:

<p>With the following words:</p> <p>OM SVABHAVASUDDAH SARVADHARMAH SVABHAVA SUDDHO ‘HAM</p>	<p>(Self-visualisation as Avalokitesvara begins here)</p> <p>OM SVABHAVASUDDAH SARVADHARMAH SVABHAVA SUDDHO ‘HAM</p>
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This mantra, unusually, is translatable. Put simply it means ‘all dharmas are pure of self-nature, and so am I’. It is a powerful verse that is well known in the Order, and I imagine we all try to practice it and make it real, because we know from Mr. Chen’s admonition[†] that this is the element that makes the practice into an authentic sadhana. The fact that all dharmas are sunyata, *sarvadharmasunyata*, somehow brings it alive. So at this point we need to find a way to relax into the truth that nothing in our experience has substantial, permanent existence. It may work to recall some previous insight meditation such as the Six Elements Practice. But what is best is to look directly at our experience right now and see how it is actually empty in that way. So at other times we should practice insight methods so that we can do that, so that this aspect of sadhana practice will come to life.

<p>Out of the state of the great unbounded Dharmadhatu,</p> <p>A throne of jewels granting all kinds of wants:</p> <p>Carpet of lotus unstained by the Round’s ills;</p> <p>Disc of a moon, clear light of its very nature; and</p> <p>Thereon Myself: all Buddhas actual in Avalokita,</p>	<p>From the limitless dimension of Dharmadhatu,</p> <p>Arises a wish fulfilling jewel throne,</p> <p>A lotus seat unspoiled by samsara’s flaws,</p> <p>A moon disc whose nature is illuminating clarity,</p> <p>And on that am I, Avalokitesvara who embodies all Buddhas.</p>
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[†] One of Sangharakshita’s teachers Yogi Chen, who famously insisted that unless one’s realisation of sunyata is authentic, the visualisations of sadhana yoga will be nothing but ‘vulgar magic’.

<p>The colour of spotless conch and water crystal,</p> <p>Whose very pleasant smiling face is calm and graceful;</p> <p>Of Four Hands, the first pair's palms joined at his Heart,</p> <p>Whilst those above hold crystal rosary and lotus-jem;</p> <p>Most fair his Feet, in adamantine posture seated:</p> <p>He is decked with many ravishing silks and jewels,</p> <p>Adorned with tresses and crest-knot of indigo locks.</p> <p>Atop his Head, uniting all Buddhas' jnana, chief of all refuge-places,</p> <p>His essence our guru, form Immeasurable Light, the Family's master</p> <p>sits well pleased in aspect.</p>	<p>The colour of spotless conch and water-crystal,</p> <p>Whose very pleasant smiling face is calm and graceful;</p> <p>And with four hands,</p> <p>The first pair joined together at his heart,</p> <p>The other holding a crystal mala and a lotus with a jewel.</p> <p>He is completely beautiful, seated in vajra posture.</p> <p>Decked with many delightful silks and jewels,</p> <p>Handsome with his indigo locks and top-knot.</p> <p>Above his head, the lord of all sources of refuge,</p> <p>Sits uniting the timeless awareness of all Buddhas,</p> <p>In appearance Amitabha, and in essence our own teacher –</p> <p>Well pleased Lord of the (Lotus) Family.</p>
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The great unbounded Dharmadhatu is the reality of *sarvadharmasunyata* that you're calling upon with that mantra. It comes with with the metaphor of the blue sky indicating sunyata. The blue sky often seems to be applied rather literally in sadhana practice, so that one imagines a blue sky thinking that this will lead to realising sunyata, rather than making any attempt to realise it. One should make some attempt here. The metaphor should evoke the sense that there are no boundaries: experience is boundless, limited only by your imagination, and it is by opening your heart to that vastness of vision that you start the visualisation. But the quality of that vastness should come from insight

practice, because that is not about size or scope so much as freedom from self-view.

So from the limitless dimension of Dharmadhatu arises a wish-fulfilling jewel throne, a lotus seat unspoiled by saṃsāra's flaws, a moon disk whose nature is illuminating clarity. It is worth remembering that as well as describing the self-visualisation, every detail of this is also metaphor, hinting at other meanings. This is the case too with *And on that am I, Avalokitesvara who embodies all Buddhas*. The identification is from an ultimate, Buddha-nature perspective quite literal – there has never been a moment when we were not Avalokitesvara in our nature (though strangely we never realised that). But it is also metaphorical, something playful, like gaming or acting in a play – and taking a break from our usual identity – can be a way to learn and reflect upon life.

So from this point, I try to replace every element of the sense I have of myself with *Avalokitesvara, who embodies all Buddhas, the colour of spotless conch and water crystal, whose very pleasant smiling face is calm and graceful. And with four hands, the first pair joined together at his heart, with the other pair, the upper hands, holding a crystal mala and a lotus with a jewel.* Obviously this is a very radical change, but we go with it – wherever it might take us. The point is to open up to something beyond what we can imagine through stretching our imagination to its limits. There are doubtless elements in the visualisation that we don't like or which seem peculiar: but just do it with patience, kindness and if necessary a sense of humour.

He is completely beautiful, seated in vajra posture. Decked with many delightful silks and jewels, Handsome with his indigo locks and top-knot. So you have this serene sense of beauty and it's obviously an inner an inner sense that this is a beautiful state as well as beautiful appearance.

Holding a crystal mala and a lotus with a jewel. That was a clarification for me after years of practising with Driver's translation. 'Lotus-jem' made me wonder whether they were supposed to be connected, so the metaphor was a lotus that is *like* a gem. But according to Lama Tillman, the Tibetan means a lotus with a jewel *in it*, which is different.

Above his head the lord of all sources of refuge Sits uniting the timeless awareness of all buddhas In appearance Amitābha and in essence our own teacher. Actually I think John Driver does that nicely with *Atop his Head, uniting all Buddhas' jnana, chief of all refuge-places, His essence our guru, form Immeasurable Light, the Family's master sits well pleased in aspect* but it's saying the same thing. Amitabha sitting above our head is, metaphorically, the principle of the teacher being 'above us' as it were.

I asked how people felt about doing this. I think it was Vassika who said ‘Yes – when I did it for the first time on the last retreat, it just felt amazing. You know, I haven’t done self-visualisation in my sadhana before. So it made a significant difference to do self-visualization.’ I said something like, ‘It’s a great thing to do and actually the Tara practice is like that as well and also the Vajrasattva.’ Not in the same sort of way, she said. Because it’s as though with the Avalokitesvara practice you’re Avalokitesvara *suddenly*. The identification is very specific and strong isn’t it? It’s like Avalokitesvara is me, it’s almost like that. And the process is different in the Vajrasattva whereas in this, yeah straight away there’s no issue you immediately are Avalokitesvara, even before you sat down – it feels a bit outrageous, yes it’s amazing and outrageous because I did the Vajrasattva etc. and it’s not quite the same. It feels to me like it’s a manifestation of all those intentions that we’ve been developing. It’s a manifestation through us as Avalokitesvara. Parami said: I’ve only done it a couple of times and the other day when you led it through, I don’t know, it was in the last retreat, I found it very, very moving actually and... I can’t really describe it. I find it interesting that it says I am Avalokitesvara but then it carries on describing him in the third person. I think for me it makes a big difference how much preparation I’ve done. So I think what you’re saying, Vassika, resonates quite strongly with me. If I get to this point in the practice and I’ve got quite concentrated and I can really resonate or have an effect, then actually it just feels like there really isn’t much difference between being or not being Avalokitesvara, being me or not being me. There’s something around that where there’s a kind of, what’s the word, numinous, liminal quality that happens where it just doesn’t feel so solid or something? I don’t know if that makes sense, but you did ask about feelings.’

So we’ve built up the visualization. And there’s a reflection on the nature and quality of that visualisation at this point. And this is tremendously important:

<p>As forms in a glass, deities in ourselves we image:</p> <p>Image and void conjoined are maya’s dance;</p> <p>Dancer-like, divers costumes make him fair:</p> <p>Fair, comely, mirrored image of the mind.</p>	<p>We ourselves, as the body of the deity, Are like the appearance of a reflection in a mirror,</p> <p>Are the dance of illusion, the union of appearance and emptiness.</p> <p>Beautiful like a dancer who appears in many costumes,</p> <p>A pleasing, lovely reflection of the appearances of mind.</p>
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Let's take John Driver: *As forms in a glass, deities in ourselves we image. Image and void conjoined are Maya's dance. Dancer-like, divers costumes make him fair, Fair, comely, mirrored image of the mind.* This is lovely, and Tillman has also a very beautiful language: *We ourselves, as the body of the deity, Are like the appearance of a reflection in the mirror. Are the dance of illusion, the union of appearance and emptiness. Beautiful like a dancer who appears in many costumes, A pleasing, lovely reflection of the appearances of mind.*

So here you imagine what you look like in the mirror as Avalokitesvara. But that is also part of a reflection on how things appear to us. The manner in which things manifest to our senses is actually very mysterious. The actual experience is normally dulled by the sheer familiarity of it, but visual appearance alone is highly interesting and the method of sadhana visualisation is trying to get you into that space and question it all. You know you've *created* this rather imperfect visualisation of yourself as Avalokitesvara in meditation. But do you realise that you do it when you're walking around making a piece of toast in the kitchen? Do you realise that your self-visualisation is constant? Reflect on this, and something rather basic is revealed.

So you can profitably spend a longer time with that visualisation and that reflection on the mirror. It's a good idea to try and stabilise the visualisation and with that, some of the inner body practices can help, because they offer a deeper way of dwelling in physical experience. The inner body awareness entails visualisation that in some ways is similar to that of the deity, and doing it makes a kind of bridge between the two at the point where our deepened physical experience is reimagined through the visualization. The practice can be really interesting and extremely fruitful.

As the sadhana says, stay there for a while:

<p>Keep your mind on the deity for a little; and then, with single-pointed devotion to the guru above your head, three or more times entreat him earnestly:</p>	<p>So saying this, keep your mind a while on the deity. Then, with wholehearted devotion to the teacher above your head, recite the following.</p>
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But then there's a change. At this point you inwardly look up to Amitabha, your teacher, and make a prayer to them.

<p>"Precious Guru, in whom all refuges unite,</p> <p>Bhagavan, Tathagata, Arahata,</p> <p>Truly complete Buddha Measureless Light,</p> <p>I entreat you to think of me with a kindly heart:</p> <p>Transmute our evil works and sin's obscurement, that they be wiped away;</p> <p>Transmute the two stocks(9), that they be swiftly completed;</p> <p>Transmute us that true samadhi be born;</p> <p>Transmute us that we swiftly gain Buddhahood."</p>	<p>Precious teacher, in whom all refuges unite,</p> <p>Bhagavan, Tathagata, Arahata,</p> <p>Truly complete Buddha Measureless Light,</p> <p>Please look upon me with your loving heart,</p> <p>Please grant your blessing so our harmful deeds and veils may be purified.</p> <p>Grant your blessing so both accumulations may be accomplished quickly,</p> <p>Grant your blessing so pure samadhi may arise,</p> <p>Grant your blessing so we may swiftly gain Buddhahood."</p>
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Something important here about the quality of the prayer is that I notice that while Driver expresses this as a petitionary prayer, as though the guru themselves could somehow transform our klesha or 'evil works', our accumulation (stock) of merit and wisdom etc. Unfortunately this is impossible, hence I think you get petitionary prayer in Buddhism only as a metaphor, (which you could read this as). Tillman however has used the language of blessing, so that this is a request for the teacher's blessing. I know that in the (unrecorded) seminar he gave on this sadhana, Sangharakshita made a very similar point: he said we should read the language of 'transmutation' as blessing, so read '*Bless our evil works*' etc. I don't know what the Tibetan word is but maybe it's something like *adhithana*.

In a way this is simply the wishing prayer that all our obscurations, anything that gets in the way, may be purified, may it be dissolved, seen through, the accumulations (*sambhara*) – both merit and wisdom – be accomplished through this practice and may pure samadhi arise. In a way it's simply the way Avalokitesvara relates to the Guru principle. He kind of looks up and he makes his wish.

He makes his wish, but the answer that comes isn't in the same dimension as the request. The answer is really something else.

<p>And with the words:</p> <p>Dharma that sums bliss, woe, Nirvana, Round,</p> <p>Of Dharmas all the root, is our own mind:</p> <p>Mind's essence scan: in colour, shape it's not -</p> <p>It's not, and so of 'one' and 'more' it's void;</p> <p>Through voidness, from Birth, Cease and Stay it's free.</p> <p>Free, yet clear images cease not; all constructs stilled;</p> <p>The still mind-essence, great without bounds(10), is this.</p> <p>Let go' slackly into a state free from all mental activity.</p>	<p>And with the words:</p> <p>(pointing out instruction spoken by Amitabha)</p> <p>Dharma is what pervades samsara, nirvana, happiness and suffering.</p> <p>And the root of all Dharmas is one's own mind.</p> <p>In mind, there is no colour and no shape.</p> <p>Being no thing by nature, it is empty of 'one' and 'many.'</p> <p>Being empty, it is free of arising, ceasing and dwelling.</p> <p>Being free, it is unceasing clear appearance where all constructs (have) come to rest.</p> <p>This mind of peace is great, unbounded, and free from all extremes.</p> <p>Let go and relax into a state free from all mental activity.</p>
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This is the 'pointing-out instruction:' a pithy directive given by the teacher designed to spark non-conceptual insight in a disciple. I use Tillman's translation here because it's a little bit clearer, but do apply these points with the more familiar words as well.

Amitabha says, *Dharma is what pervades samsara, nirvana, happiness and suffering. And the root of all dharmas is one's own mind.* He's pointing out that whether your experience is a samsaric or a nirvanic one, whether you're awakened, unawakened, happy or suffering, the root of that is your own mind. It is your mind that is going through all of this. So have a look at that mind. He is pointing out that the vital point of experience – any experience whatever – is mind.

And *In mind there is no colour and no shape.* This is an interesting challenge: how do the elements of colour and form come about in our experience when we

encounter objects in the world. They aren't already in the mind presumably. Indeed along with the vast majority we'd assume they are straightforwardly in the objects themselves. Everyone normally assumes that an object has a form and colour and what we perceive is that. But having let the question in, it may linger on and have a life of its own. These sense organs, funny little pieces of meat in our heads that make pictures and sensations happen somewhere... in a new way, we may wonder how. We have learned the scientific explanations of rods and cones but in immediate sensate experience where is the screen, where are the sounds we are hearing happening? It is complex because when a police siren goes past we already know its jarring tones and maybe have a habitual way to un-hear it, too. When turning the door handle or detecting the fragrance of toast, what in that actual moment, in that experience, denotes the smell and the sight? You have to actually do it and ask the question, it does not work to sit in front of the page and explain. In actual experience... the shapes of these l e t t e r s... where are they happening? Likewise the form of the yidam Mahakarunika, diamond white and marvelous, arises in awareness in a way that needs not merely to be acknowledged factually, but explored in tactile, granular experience. So in this way the author of the sadhana takes the mind, and points to the inexplicable way that experiences arise within it.

Being no thing by nature it is empty of one and many. The pointing out instruction is nudging us with the Buddha's realisation of sunyata, emptiness. Sunyata means that the self-nature of everything is like toast-fragrance, it is not anything concrete. The marvelous concept of emptiness opens our closed suppositions like spring flowers and questions the nature of all individual things: you realise that individual things are never simply what they appear to be. They are *no thing by nature*: they can be constructed in different ways, seen from different viewpoints and therefore are not concrete and fixed.

And because they're not concrete and fixed, you can't really be so solid in the divisions that you make. Having pointed out that this mind is empty of fixed nature, Amitabha's verse points further to say that this means, for example, that the concept of number can't be applied to it: *it is empty of one and many*. Is there one single mind here? Of course, that is the assumption that probably, and understandably, we have never considered. Why would you? But on reflection we can recall being 'in two minds' and looking more deeply, the mind is seen in its nature to be numerically indescribable

Being empty, It is free of arising, ceasing and dwelling. As by now we are having to accept, the mind's nature in its lack of solid self-nature is simply not rationally comprehensible (except on paper, in theory). The very business of something coming to be or coming into awareness and ceasing, or staying in awareness is all illusory: what is 'it' that comes to an end when whatever-it-is seemingly comes to an end? It's not an illusion – something is definitely happening – but

because we can't quite explain what, it is described as illusory, as *like* an illusion: a metaphor.

As I spoke I wondered, when the sound of my voice that originally intoned that sequence of words came to an end, what was it? I knew I could tell myself, Look, it was the sound of your voice, Kamalashila; but there was so much more that it was, because of multiple interpretations. The 'it' – the referent in whatever circumstances – is always up for question. Whatever it is, it's *free of arising, ceasing and dwelling*. It doesn't even stay. So what actually occurs to our perception is just stuff appearing, stuff appearing which we just interpret in various ways. And actually, it's all very clear: you know the colour and the form of something is nice and clear, it's just that we can't make such definitive statements about it that we used to think we could. Before we developed some glimpses of wisdom, we used to think that the world is literally what I see; now we know, Hmm, it's all a bit illusory. And that's the beginning of liberative wisdom.

So all constructs come to rest. Tillman indicates an alternative, that they *have* come to rest. The constructions we impose on our world – of solid existence, number, appearance to the screen of our mind, etc. – have no real place in that experience. They're just very provisional, these constructs, like the words and descriptions we use.

So realising this, we can put it all down. That's it, there is no need whatsoever to cling to experiences as ownable or likeable or horrible, as this or that – to react, like or dislike or do anything at all in relation to them. This is really it, potentially: the actual end of samsara. Hence: *this mind of peace is great, unbounded and free from all extremes*. So the idea here is to take the teaching in all its incomprehensibility, so that you finally know: you can't really understand it, right? You really can't really grasp it fully and what you do grasp, the amazingness of what you do grasp, you just stay with that. And the nature of this is *great, unbounded and free from all extremes*. So here in the meditation, or any time, you just let go and relax.

We have spent some time analysing this, and we needed, but that's not the point of the pointing out instruction. The actual point is that you are free and you should let go into freedom. So now in the meditation you don't try and fathom it out any more. You just let go and relax and just experience whatever you experience.

So at this point in the practice you've built up the visualisation of yourself as Avalokitesvara, you've reflected on its emptiness and its special qualities of transparency and emptiness, and now you do this in much more depth, beyond

the extent you can fathom. The pointing out invokes the unfathomable aspect of reality and allows you to relax very naturally into that, to have faith and confidence in it and just let go. So that's what we do when we do this practice.

Mahabodhi said, Yeah, I think it's interesting that it says concepts come to rest; it doesn't say they disappear. You know, it's not like there's a kind of like a restlessness there: it's rather beautiful. Yes indeed, I said, it is rather beautiful that it's as though it's all resolved now and the whole business of constructing on top of actual reality can come to rest. The concepts are fine, they aren't in the way. You don't have to do anything, it's not some task you have to do: it is already free and you can just let go.

This is the Mahamudra element in the sadhana. The Mahakarunika practice, as any sadhana also could be, is a direct introduction to Mahamudra. Along with the visualisation you let go into emptiness in this way. If find yourself thinking this is pretentious, or too advanced for you, it's a common feeling that is counteracted by the Mahamudra point of view, which encourages us to take heart in our potential Buddha nature. Be assured, it's fine, you are not getting above yourself in making the attempt at realizing emptiness. We have to start somewhere; we start where we are.

The word Mahamudra literally means the great seal, i.e. the stamp or characteristic of emptiness. The idea is that everything is 'stamped' with the characteristic of no-self nature. We had an opportunity to engage in that right at the opening point of the sadhana, when we reflected on the *Om svabhavasuddha* mantra, which in a way is a pointing out instruction. The Mahakarunika sadhana invites us to open our hearts to the nature of mind with that *svabhavasuddha* mantra at the beginning, and then again during the visualisation with the verse about the reflection in the mirror, and yet again here, with the pointing out instruction. How absolutely brilliant. So we do that and maybe you can't do it for very long. Maybe you do just sitting for 5 or 10 minutes at this point, having heard the instruction. You can really get into it though: when I was doing this in my retreat tent years ago, I did long sessions after this pointing out instruction. Indeed you can turn it into a practice in itself, once you are very familiar with the sadhana: recall the pointing out instruction and then sit with it for a long time. For it's true, however long or short a period that you sit, that in mind there is no color, no shape and that it's free and empty.

So you explore that to your heart's content and when you've had enough and can no longer sustain your interest, you come back – to the six realms.

<p>After thinking:</p> <p>"Within my heart, on lotus-moon, the letter HRIH; around</p> <p>Encircled by the mantra of six letters, whence, light-rays</p> <p>Urging the Jina's compassion, may he transmute me;</p> <p>And the welfare of beings in the six classes of life be performed!"</p>	<p>Afterwards:</p> <p>Inside my heart, on a lotus-moon, is the letter HRIH.</p> <p>Around it is the mantra of six letters.</p> <p>Light-rays issue forth urging the Jina's compassion</p> <p>To grant his blessings and perform the welfare of the six kinds of beings.</p>
<p>Recite 500, etc., times:</p> <p>OM MANI PADME HUM</p>	<p>Recite 500, etc., times:</p> <p>OM MANI PADME HUM</p>

So this is where you do the mantra recitation of Om Mani Padme Hum. *Within my heart, on lotus moon, the letter Hrih; around /Encircled by the mantra of six letters, whence, light rays /Urging the Jina's compassion, may he transmute me; /And the welfare of beings in the six classes of life be performed.* You feel the presence of Amitabha, Amitabha pours down light rays of blessing – it's kind of up to you how you see that – and from the heart, the Hrih there is a fairly complex visualisation which I'll explain. It depicts the Six Realms of samsara as you also find in the Wheel of Life, where the Buddha appears in each realm to help those caught in each of the different modes of samsaric life, as characterized by different degrees of greed, hatred and ignorance.

The visualisation Sangharakshita taught me is this. Arranged around the *Hrih* laterally as though on lotus petals are the six syllables of the mantra *Om Mani Pa Dme Hum* in different colours that connect to the six realms. White *Om* is for the gods, which makes sense in a way (I can imagine them in pure, regal white robes). Green *Ma* is for the asuras, no doubt because they're very jealous. Yellow *Ni* is for the human beings, for no obvious reason. Blue *Pa* is for the animals, also for no particular reason I know of. Red *Dme* is for the Pretas – maybe because it is the colour of attraction, which they have become addicted to. Black *Hum* is for the hells which I associate with black smoke and darkness.

The mantra sounds. You hear and feel it internally at least as much as you actively chant it, and the light rays flow simultaneously out to each realm from your heart, up to Amitabha's heart in prayer, and also down from Amitabha through the central channel to your heart. There is a lot of significance in these heart-movements, which can contain very beautiful and delicate positive

aspiration, and considerable complexity in what is associated with the delicate flowing substance. Its radiance is sonant, i.e. with sound as well as colour. This is moreover conceived as ‘nectar,’ something that first of all has the connotation of nourishment or blessing that is both received in our heart and, through that, dispensed to the world. Nourishment (i.e. food) connects also to the senses of taste (even smell) and touch. A second more mythic connotation of ‘nectar’ is of the ceremonial anointing of a spiritual aspirant or a ruler with consecrated water or precious ointment.

I usually do at least six hundred *Om Mani Padme Hum* mantras, one hundred for each of the six realms: 100 for the gods, 100 for the asuras, 100 for the humans and so on, and go right round. The text says *500, etc.* here. So that’s what you do.

Then eventually, it is time to bring the practice to a close. Recall all the details of the visualisation and let them turn into rays of light that merge into your body and mind. This identifies the sadhana with our life outside meditation; there is more to this identification as well, as we’ll see from what follows.

And when leaving off the session think of the carpets ⁽¹¹⁾ as turning into the form of rays of light and merging into oneself.	Then, at the end of the session, we think of the seats as turning into rays of light and merging into ourselves.
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So even though the visualisation has been very intense there is quite a narrow boundary between the visualisation and the outside world. This can be seen as intentional: given the compassionate nature of Avalokitesvara it is important that we connect the two

And then there’s a final dedication, which directs us in a more circumspect manner towards the post-meditation mindspace.

<p>Make whatever dedications of merit and prayers ⁽¹²⁾ may be known, such as:</p> <p>By this good act may I and other creatures</p> <p>Meet, in this life, long life, health and Sublime Dharma;</p> <p>And, in the next, being born in the Sukhavati field</p> <p>Swiftly attain the rank of Avalokita!</p> <p>With body, speech and mind never parted from the three identifications of Deity, Mantra, and Jnana,</p> <p>Acting for the welfare of beings by the power of compassion,</p> <p>may we fulfil the course of action of the Jinas' sons!</p> <p>At all occasions, whether Here, the Hereafter, or Between,</p> <p>never let go the hook of compassion,</p> <p>Of the best guide, the Guru Measureless Light,</p> <p>be we preserved from all downfall in life or stillness!"</p>	<p>Next comes the dedication prayer.</p> <p>By this beneficial act may I and other sentient beings</p> <p>Live long, be healthy and endowed with the noble Dharma,</p> <p>And in the future be born in the land of Sukhavati,</p> <p>To quickly attain the state of mighty Avalokitesvara.</p> <p>Carrying continuously on the path the understanding</p> <p>That in essence our ordinary body, speech and mind</p> <p>Are Avalokitesvara's form, mantra and timeless awareness,</p> <p>Acting for the welfare of beings by the power of compassion,</p> <p>May we accomplish all the activities of the Bodhisattvas.</p> <p>In all occasions, whether in this life, future lives, or in the Bardo,</p> <p>May we never let go the hook of compassion,</p> <p>Of the best teacher, the Protector Amitabha,</p> <p>And be preserved from the shortcomings of cyclic existence and of (one sided) nirvana.</p>
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By this good act – let's go with John Driver – *may I and other creatures Meet in this life, long life, health and the sublime dharma, And in the next, being born in the Sukhavati field, swiftly attain the rank of Avalokita.* Or with Tillman that last phrase: *the state of mighty Avalokitesvara* – I prefer that really.

With body, speech and mind never parted from the three identifications of deity, mantra and jnana. This is how you link the sadhana with ordinary life, which is a vital component of the practice. You identify the form of Avalokitesvara that you

visualised in the sadhana with your physical body as you go through life. Also your speech – what you actually say plus the inner commenting, verbalizing faculty that is akin to speech – is identified with the mantra. The mind is identified with jnana, the ultimate realization of the practice. This means remembering that the jnana pointed to in Amitabha's instruction, the wisdom verse *As forms in a glass* and the *Om svabhavasuddha* mantra that precedes the main visualisation is a potential in this very mind at all times, despite frequent states of confusion, anger, craving etc. This can have a transforming effect particularly at times when otherwise we would feel overwhelmed by the mental poisons. There can be a tendency to feel that we are *hopelessly* caught in our samsaric patterns, which is actually the wrong view, the subtle clinging that maintains the entanglement. Until full awakening unskillful states are to be expected. The point to remember is that the five poisons and the five wisdoms are not separate. As illustrated in the symbol of the vajra, both are potentials in the same mind that is fully changeable because it is empty of any kind of permanent essence. Hence our dharma practice has the power to transform the poisoned mind into the wisdom mind.

The identification of the mantra with our inner and outer speech should be done in the same spirit, of making the connection with our potential for wisdom and compassion. Our constant commentary is also transformable and it will be *this* commentary, *this* capacity to form words, to gossip and manipulate or express understanding and sensitivity, that will be transformed. We also need to reflect on this during mantra recitation in the practice, i.e. that this stream of activity is us connecting with the awakened mind's expression in words and also the intentionality that drives speech.

The identification of the visualised form of four armed Mahakarunika with our physical body, again, makes a connection with the potential for transforming daily life. As we self-visualise as Mahakarunika the inner body element of the visualisation, the seed syllables and energy flow, can nudge an actual experience of subtle energies in the body. With regular mindfulness of this connection with the Bodhisattva Mahakarunika, arising both from the self visualisation in the sadhana and from body mindfulness in daily life, will come more of a conviction that this body that we experience here and now is our precious vehicle for awakening.

Acting for the welfare of beings by the power of compassion, may we fulfil the course of action of the Jinās' sons. Sons or perhaps 'offspring' indicates the lineage of mandala of practice stemming from the Buddha's central realisation, that we are part of and have a duty to live up to. Tillman has simply *May we accomplish all the activities of the Bodhisattvas.* I don't know if that's a less literal rendering of the Tibetan, but there is the same suggestion that a certain responsibility comes with the practice.

At all occasions, whether here, the hereafter or between – in the bardo, the intermediate state between lives – never let go the hook of compassion of the best guide, the Guru Measureless Light, be we preserved from all downfall in life or stillness. Tillman makes that odd last phrase clear: And be preserved from the shortcomings of cyclic existence and of (one sided) nirvana – that is any aspiration for awakening short of the full Mahayana ideal.

Finally, there is a further direction for practice when not meditating:

<p>Think at all times of the dwelling-place as the Field of Sukhavati; and of oneself as waiting, with the pride of Avalokita, upon the guru, Immeasurable Light; and through not parting with the three Identifications of body, speech and mind learn to fulfil with Great compassion the welfare of beings.</p>	<p>Think at all times of the place where you are staying as the Field of Sukhavati; and of yourself as waiting, with the self assurance of Avalokita, upon the teacher, Immeasurable Light. And through not parting with the three integrations (Skt?) (khyer so sum) of body, speech and mind learn to fulfil with great Compassion the welfare of beings.</p>
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When the practice is over you try to view your experience as like Amitabha's pure land, Sukhavati. So again there's an imaginative transformation of the ordinary world. I mean one could be literal about this and have faith that one's life actually is the field of Sukhavati which would have a definite effect on one's practice if one could do that authentically. After all what is life? Since we don't really know it might as well be Sukhavati, if you look at it that way. Because actually our life consists of a constant stream of opportunities to practice, and we could think of ourselves *as waiting with the self-assurance of Avalokita, upon the teacher, Immeasurable Light* – appreciating everything that reminded us to practice. No doubt it's my modern contemporary Western problem that I feel I couldn't do that in an authentic way, though reflecting on the metaphor works well I think.

Finally there is the reminder that it is *through not parting with the three integrations of body, speech and mind* – that is after the meditation, identifying with with Avalokitesvara's form, mantra and jnana – that we can *learn to fulfil with great compassion the welfare of beings*. It is a very grand and stirring end to the practice.

And here is the colophon, the usual supplement with information about how the sadhana came about.

<p>In view of his being urged from a great distance by his own disciple, Gragspa rGyal-mTshan, that a sadhana of Mahakarunika, done into verse, was needed, the Reverend(13) dKon-mChog Lhun-grub very quickly wrote at E-vam chos-ldan, and sent to the Eastern region of mDo-khams, this spiritual practice of Mahakarunika and the Mahamudra conjointly, Doctrine of the glorious Sa-skyapa, 'father' and 'son'.</p>	<p>In view of his being urged from a great distance by his own disciple, Gragspa rGyal-mTshan, that a sadhana of Mahakarunika, done into verse, was needed, the monk dKon-mChog Lhun-grub very quickly wrote at E-vam Chos-ldan, and sent to the Eastern region of mDo-khams, this spiritual practice of Mahakarunika and the Mahamudra conjointly, Doctrine of the glorious Sa-skyapa father-son lineage.</p>
<p>Mangalam</p>	<p>Sarva Mangalam</p>

Part Three: Mahakarunika Sadhana Instruction

This is a commentary by the author of the sadhana on how to practice it. For convenience the text is repeated here:

Part Three: Mahakarunika Sadhana Commentary

(From Tillman Lhundrup. This part of the Mahakarunika Sadhana was not included in the text given to Sangharakshita)

This text explains how to put into practice the compassionate Mahakarunika and Mahamudra in union.

OM SVASTI SIDDHI.

I prostrate to the Lama and to the Three Jewels.

First settle yourself with crossed legs on a comfortable seat. Then take refuge in the Lama; take refuge in the Buddha; take refuge in the Dharma; take refuge in the Sangha.

Go for refuge In this way three times. Then continue, saying:

I will obtain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. And for this purpose, I will practice the profound absorption of training in Bodhicitta.

Next comes OM SVABHAVASUDDHA SARVADHARMA SVABHAVASUDDHO 'HAM. Having recited this, my own body beyond reference points becomes emptiness, and is thus meditated as being pure.

From there I myself, in one instant, arise on a jewel throne with a lotus and moon seat, as the Great Compassionate One with a white body, one face, and four arms. The first two arms are joined in anjali (i.e. the palms put together in front of the heart), enjoining all Buddhas to accomplish the benefit of sentient beings. The right lower hand is holding a white mala, and the left lower one a lotus with a jewel.

I am adorned with a diadem of jewels, with earrings, necklaces and all ornaments, and dressed in garments of multicoloured silk. From my body emanate measureless light rays which perform the benefit of sentient beings.

On the top of my head as the crown ornament is Amitabha, who is the very nature of the timeless awareness of all Buddhas united into one.

(Mahakarunika) should be meditated as like the reflection in a mirror, as being without self nature: this is how we should establish awareness of him in our mind.

Having visualised Amitabha on our head, we then pray to the Bhagavan, Tathagata, Arahata - to the Samyak Sambuddha Amitayus - to purify all our negativities and veils, and to quickly increase the accumulation of merit and awareness. (We pray) for him to grant his blessing so that the pure authentic samadhi will arise in our mindstream, and that we will obtain quickly the state of actual completion (perfection). We pray three times like this from the bottom of our heart.

Then we develop the understanding that our own mind is the root of all happiness and suffering, samsara and nirvana; and that nevertheless this mind, if we analyse it, does not exist as something with a colour or a shape. It is neither one or many; by nature it is empty. Having this non-existent nature, it is from time without beginning unborn. What we call its continuity is also empty. Because of its being unborn, it is empty from the beginning. Because of being unborn it also does not reside anywhere, and it is not dwelling anywhere in between either; due to this it is also said to be empty. Since it is neither dwelling or moving as something, then it is indestructible. And finally this is why we say it has no end. (i.e. it is also empty because it has no cessation).

Being empty of essence it is unborn, so it has no beginning. Since it is unborn it doesn't stay anywhere, so it is empty of dwelling. Since it is not dwelling anywhere it cannot also be called moving, and that's also why it cannot be destroyed. So it has no cessation. All of these are the reasons why it is called empty. It has no

foundations and no root. And it is beyond all elaborations, that's why we say it is like the sky. And being like the sky it cuts through all elaborations. (The sky is where our elaborations stop, because you have no reference points)

It is beyond words and concepts – we cannot meditate on it using words and concepts. It is not constructed by mind. It is a state of simplicity; and understanding this we should rest our mind in complete relaxation.

Then after that, in order to train ourselves in this understanding:

Don't let your mind elaborate. Dwell within – dwell inside for as long as this (understanding) arises, and then in your own heart meditate both the letter HRIH and the mantra garland as being of light. From that, light emanates which stimulates the Compassion of all the Buddhas. Due to this we ourselves receive

the blessing, while the benefit of beings is also accomplished. Meditating on that, recite as much as you can OM MANI PEME HUM.

When you have finished that recitation, dedicate the roots of virtue to obtaining Buddhahood. Then when you enter into activity, imagine the place where you live as being Devachen and yourself as being the servant of the Bhagavan, the protector Amitayus – yourself being actually the Jowo Mahakarunika, the Great Compassionate one, having the self-assurance or pride of being the Lord Mahakarunika. Once you have generated that kind of feeling or attitude, then never be separated from it in your daily activities. If you constantly practise like that, in this life you will live long and all obstacles to your practice will be pacified (overcome). In your next life you will be born in Devachen and will quickly accomplish the actual manifest complete state and the practice of Awakening.

So this is the way to practise the union of Great Compassion and Mahamudra. It comes from the profound oral instructions of the noble Sakyapas, whose student (Motom Sagye Jupur..?) made prayers to me (the author) in the year of the Male Fire Dog, in the fourth month, on the eighth day. Then I wrote down this text.

This is a third component of the Mahakarunika and Mahamudra Sadhana. It seems that Sangharakshita may not have received this, or that John Driver either didn't come across it or ignored it when translating the text. It is clearly integral to the original sadhana since it is by its author and relates directly to it. I and believe it's called the Jenang, which can mean permission. These practical instructions, in some form at least, would be necessary for a practitioner to be able to do the sadhana effectively, and maybe receiving those could be a requirement for getting permission from a teacher to do the sadhana. Sangharakshita was given some instruction at the time I believe, so maybe that was enough.

This explanation has got quite a few interesting features. We've been through the entire sadhana now, so this supplementary text offers us a useful way to review our understanding.

Much of it is self-explanatory and we may already have covered points the author draws attention to. But he brings a special perspective to the practice.

This text explains how to put into practice the compassionate Mahakarunika and Mahamudra in union.

OM SVASTI SIDDHI.

I prostrate to the Lama and to the Three Jewels.

First settle yourself with crossed legs on a comfortable seat. Then take refuge in the Lama; take refuge in the Buddha; take refuge in the Dharma; take refuge in the Sangha.

Go for refuge In this way three times. Then continue, saying:

I will obtain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. And for this purpose, I will practice the profound absorption of training in Bodhicitta.

Om Svasti Siddhi. I think that must mean something like, may this practice bring good fortune and spiritual success.

I prostrate to the Lama and to the Three Jewels. First settle yourself with crossed legs on a comfortable seat. Then take refuge in the Lama; take refuge in the Buddha; take refuge in the Dharma; take refuge in the Sangha. So that's a good start with the four Tantric refuges.

I will obtain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. And for this purpose I will practice the profound absorption of training in Bodhicitta. So actually he's made quite a leap there. He hasn't bothered to explain the small lineage entreaty and the request for blessing that comes at the beginning of the sadhana. Or the lineage prayer for that matter. He goes straight to the heart of the sadhana, to the Bodhicitta verse which goes, if I remember rightly, *For the sake of all beings equaling the skies who have been my mother, I will gain unsurpassable awakening. To this purpose I will practice* – as our author puts it here – *'a profound absorption of training in bodhicitta.'* It's nice the way he's put that: the Bodhicitta verse takes our absorption in the practice to another level.

And then next comes *om svabhavasuddha sarvadharmasvabhavasuddho 'ham.* By the way, do chip in. If there's any points that come up around the sadhana, I think this is quite a good opportunity to look at it. And I thought in the groups we could discuss now in a bit more detail, because we're all getting into the practice a bit more.

Having recited this, my own body beyond reference points becomes emptiness and is thus meditated as being pure. This is a little bit like a kind of translation of the mantra actually. I like *my own body beyond reference points becomes emptiness.* What do you get from that? The verse before, *om svabhavasuddha sarvadharmasvabhavasuddho 'ham,* is

saying all things are sunyata. But *my own body beyond reference points* expands on what sunyata is about.

Normally when we're not meditating we're experiencing ourselves in relation to all kinds of reference points. There's the room we're in, the relation to others, the seat we're sitting on, north-south-east-west-up-down and many other referents. But when you close your eyes and go into meditation those external references dissolve. You have an experience which doesn't have a size or a shape or boundary. So this rendering of the sunyata mantra *my own body beyond reference points becomes emptiness and is thus meditated as being pure* presents it as a meditation on the arbitrariness of our usual points of reference. Take as another example space – the space we're in, or the boundary of our skin – these are extremely familiar, lifelong references that help us maintain our sense of 'me.' This is what the pointing out of sunyata is designed to undermine, to allow us to let go our ordinary habitual perception *beyond reference points*. We get a glimpse of the truth that all our usual referents are arbitrary in that sense. *And is thus meditated as being pure* – referring to the *suddha* element in the sunyata mantra – for there can be a real sense here of purification from our habitual view of things.

From there I myself, in one instant, arise on a jewel throne with a lotus and moon seat, as the Great Compassionate One with a white body, one face, and four arms. The visualisation happens all at once, in one instant. Avalokitesvara doesn't materialize slowly out of the blue sky. There he is in one instant with all that detail. This can be a really good way to visualise, because it's very natural: when we get any kind of visual impression in our mind, it is there immediately – for what it is. Indeed, it's rather interesting to check out how an image, any image, appears in the mind. For example, if you think of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, you will have an immediate impression of some kind, even if you've never even heard of it before and it is a kind of blank with a name. What does that particular impression really consist of? There is something that appears, and we may have an emotional reaction and all kinds of thoughts about it. Yet what was it? This is all very interesting because, as the pointing out instruction said, *in mind there is no colour and no shape* yet the impression we have can be very vivid and clear in itself, for what it is.

The first two arms are joined in anjali (i.e. the palms put together in front of the heart), enjoining all Buddhas to accomplish the benefit of sentient beings. That's a detail I've not heard before. *The right lower hand is holding a white mala, and the left lower one a lotus with a jewel.* This at first confuses me, because I tend to think the pair of hands holding mala and lotus are higher than the pair at his heart. However my memory is that Tillman explained that in the iconography of multi armed deities the arms join the shoulders at different heights, and this is how they're arranged in this case, with the lower two holding a white mala and lotus with a

jewel. In the sadhana it says it's a crystal mala, no doubt that's something to do with the translation.

I am adorned with a diadem of jewels, with earrings, necklaces and all ornaments, and dressed in garments of multicoloured silk. From my body emanate measureless light rays which perform the benefit of sentient beings.

Someone said, I was given the new sadhana (a simpler Avalokitesvara practice) and of course it talks about the cintamani in the anjali. Is that the jewel that's held with the lotus equivalent in this sadhana?

I said, No I think the cintamani, the wish-fulfilling jewel, is the one he holds in his hands at his heart. Maybe there could be a cintamani in the lotus as well but in this sadhana, the cintamani isn't mentioned at all. That doesn't mean there isn't one. The usual iconographical portrayal of Avalokitesvara does include the cintamani at his heart, so we can assume he holds one in the Mahakarunika sadhana too. His *anjali* gesture with the jewel signifies the bodhicitta *pranidhana* or prayer that all beings find the way to awakening. They all possess, without realising it, the potential for awakening which the wish-fulfilling cintamani symbolises.

On the top of my head as the crown ornament is Amitabha, who is the very nature of the timeless awareness of all Buddhas united into one. Timeless awareness is jnana – this is Tilmann's particular rendering. And then (Mahakarunika) should be meditated as like the reflection in a mirror, as being without self nature: this is how we should establish awareness of him in our mind. The instruction here is very condensed: this is referring to the wisdom verse.

Just imagine looking at yourself in a mirror. I remember as a child my sister and I used to play with mirrors. I was fascinated just by the fact that they reflected our faces and bodies, and the room we were in. There's a real touch of magic, and the magic seems to come from the strangeness of how sight perception works: you are putting something together but you don't know how it happens. There is something rather otherworldly or ghostly about a reflection. It might make shivers run down your spine to unexpectedly see your own reflection. Mirrors play around with our assumptions about space, and bring light into a room seemingly from nowhere. That effect doesn't necessarily require a mirror; a simple reflection in water has that same kind of mysterious feel to it. We have so many cultural references to it in the stories of magic mirrors, the portrait of Dorian Grey, and Alice through the looking glass: there is a whole world on the other side of the mirror.

I remember Sangharakshita told me that with this sadhana you could imagine (at this point in the practice) looking in a mirror and seeing Avalokitesvara, and I found that quite effective as well, again, as feeling rather spooky.

Having visualised Amitabha on our head, we then pray to the Bhagavan, Tathagata, Arahata - to the Samyak Sambuddha Amitayus - to purify all our negativities and veils, and to quickly increase the accumulation of merit and awareness. (We pray) for him to grant his blessing so that the pure authentic samadhi will arise in our mindstream, and that we will obtain quickly the state of actual completion (perfection). We pray three times like this from the bottom of our heart.

So this is the lead up to Amitabha giving the pointing out instruction. It's very much like the entreaty and supplication section in the Sevenfold Puja which comes just before the Heart Sutra, which constitutes the teaching from an awakened viewpoint, i.e. a viewpoint beyond our usual frames of reference.

I don't know why there is a switch here from Amitābha to Amitāyus. There must be some significance in this Lama's mind. So now Amitāyus or Amitābha gives his pointing out instruction and the author explains what he means:

Then we develop the understanding that our own mind is the root of all happiness and suffering, samsara and nirvana; and that nevertheless this mind, if we analyse it, does not exist as something with a colour or a shape. It is neither one or many; by nature it is empty. Having this non-existent nature, it is from time without beginning unborn. What we call its continuity is also empty. Because of its being unborn, it is empty from the beginning. Because of being unborn it also does not reside anywhere, and it is not dwelling anywhere in between either; due to this it is also said to be empty. Since it is neither dwelling or moving as something, then it is indestructible. And finally this is why we say it has no end. (i.e. it is also empty because it has no cessation).

Being empty of essence it is unborn, so it has no beginning. Since it is unborn it doesn't stay anywhere, so it is empty of dwelling. Since it is not dwelling anywhere it cannot also be called moving, and that's also why it cannot be destroyed. So it has no cessation. All of these are the reasons why it is called empty. It has no foundations and no root. And it is beyond all elaborations, that's why we say it is like the sky. And being like the sky it cuts through all elaborations. (The sky is where our elaborations stop, because you have no reference points) It is beyond words and concepts – we cannot meditate on it using words and concepts. It is not constructed by mind. It is a state of simplicity; and understanding this we should rest our mind in complete relaxation.

The first things to be appreciated is that the explanation is a pointing-out instruction in itself. It is extremely concise and cutting in the way it indicates the nature of the mind. I think the way Tillman has translated it, too, makes it

good enough to substitute for the original in the practice, at least now and again, to get a more detailed picture of what it is pointing to.

Where he says *then we develop the understanding that our own mind is the root of all happiness and suffering, samsara and nirvana* it's quite a straightforward point. It's just as the Dhammapada says, 'Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs. Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.' The mind creates our world and it's never going to do anything else: that is its nature.

Nevertheless despite being the *root of all happiness and suffering, samsara and nirvana* this mind – this very mind that we experience right this very moment, for it is vital that we check this in actual experience – if we look closely it does not exist as something with a colour or a shape. This is getting to the fact that there is obviously mind, but pinning down what happens in experience is very difficult. One thing you could say is that it has no colour or shape. With mind we can construct colour and shape – we can see shapes and we can see colours – but the mind itself isn't really that. We actually don't know what the mind is in experience (as distinct from theoretical definitions).

It is neither one or many. By nature it is empty. In other words, its nature is completely open, completely up for grabs. The word *empty*, as is often said, doesn't mean it's just nothing: it's ungraspable and in that way empty. Empty of self-nature is a good definition, but you need to make the effort to see how that applies. Assuming things have 'self-nature' is our way of grasping at things as solid and real, but it is a strategy of ignorance

Samacitta said, I just was thinking, doesn't this sort of take us way beyond our mind? You know, it's sort of, you can't see this personally. I guess you could say that, but it doesn't it really take it away from the experience that we're having, does it?

I said, We are looking at the nature of experience. Whatever the particular details of the thoughts perceptions or physical experiences we are having, that doesn't negate the fact that our very experience right here and now is of that empty nature: that's the nub of it. We are talking about what is in front of us, or what we are, or what our experience is. That is what we're talking about.

She said, Thank you, yes it's that reflection in a way, like not getting too abstract, but at the same time somehow not being stuck in the habitual point of view we have.

Yes, I said, just because it's imponderable and you can't get your head around it doesn't mean that its imponderableness isn't incredibly important – or that we can't ponder it and realise something of its nature. We are all going to flounder with this, yet we are tangibly swimming in it, the ocean of mind, itself.

Having this non-existent nature, it is from time without beginning unborn. What we call its continuity is also empty. Because of its being unborn, it is empty from the beginning. Because of being unborn it also does not reside anywhere, and it is not dwelling anywhere in between either; due to this it is also said to be empty. What is meant by 'unborn?' – clearly it is that the mind never came into existence as a concrete entity. Everything is like that: there is 'something' but there's nothing that can be pinned down as 'it.' So because of its being unborn, it is empty from the beginning. Because of being unborn it also does not reside anywhere, and it is not dwelling anywhere in between either – because you might well start wondering where the mind is. But that question also can't be answered in a literal way.

Due to this it is also said to be empty. Not having self-nature is not one single blanket quality that applies to everything. The word *sūñyatā* might seem to indicate that, but it's not so in real life. Real living things are empty of self-nature in multiple ways. It is because our attribution of solidity is applied in all kinds of ways we don't notice, as the pointing out instruction demonstrates.

These pointers are to help you to apply an insight perspective, at that moment in the meditation, to different aspects of your current experience. And as I said last night, you try and fathom the instruction a bit and then you just sit because actually you can't fathom it. You do need to flash on the impossibility. You just sit and trust that there's some process of realization happening. When the unfathomability of the situation is exposed it makes you go beyond yourself a little bit, so then you allow your body-mind the space to somehow integrate with the stretch that you've created. I think that's how it works.

Since it is neither dwelling or moving as something, then it is indestructible. And finally this is why we say it has no end. (i.e. it is also empty because it has no cessation). Since the mind is neither dwelling or moving as something then it is indestructible because there's nothing to get hold of to destroy, should you wish to do that, and also it is implied that at death it's indestructible while at the same time what exactly would end cannot be found, so we say it has no end.

Being empty of essence it is unborn, so it has no beginning. Since it is unborn it doesn't stay anywhere, so it is empty of dwelling. Since it is not dwelling anywhere it cannot also be called moving, and that's also why it cannot be destroyed. So it has no cessation. All of these are the reasons why it is called empty. It has no foundations and no root. And it is beyond all

elaborations, that's why we say it is like the sky. And being like the sky it cuts through all elaborations. (The sky is where our elaborations stop, because you have no reference points) It is beyond words and concepts – we cannot meditate on it using words and concepts. It is not constructed by mind. It is a state of simplicity; and understanding this we should rest our mind in complete relaxation.

The mind reels at each of these. The author gets inspired again and again in finding yet another way to express it. *All of these are reasons why it's called empty:* he's really getting into his stride with these explanations. *It has no foundations and no root and it is beyond all elaborations, that's why we say it's like the sky. And being like the sky, it cuts through all elaborations* – that is, our thinking about things often makes our understanding more elaborate without bringing any more clarity to what is fundamentally happening.

(The sky is where our elaborations stop, because you have no reference points)

The bracketed sentence here is Tillman's; he realises that on the face of it, it's a bit strange to talk about the sky cutting through anything, so he explains the image of the blue sky as where our mental elaborations stop, because in the vast open sky you have no reference points.

It is beyond words and concepts – we cannot meditate on it using words and concepts. It is not constructed by mind. It is a state of simplicity; and understanding this we should rest our mind in complete relaxation.

Here there is a lot to chew on and a lot to practice with. It's important to look into this for ourselves, in our own way. We need to come up against our own assumptions about the nature of mind and realise that that's what they are. There are going to be a lot of assumptions that we have, and this practice in particular helps expose them.

And he even gives an instruction about how to do that. He says

Then after that, in order to train ourselves in this understanding:

Don't let your mind elaborate. Dwell within – dwell inside for as long as this (understanding) arises

After that, that is when you've taken in the instruction, and there is some kind of intuitive appreciation of its meaning, don't let your mind elaborate anymore. Instead, '*dwell within.*' Stay still without doing anything for as long as this understanding arises. This is a 'letting go' meditation after having received the pointing out instruction. You just take it in. Stop speculating about it. You've done that enough. Just dwell inside for as long as that lasts. That's quite important, to give some open space to that.

And it's after that, that, you know, when that's died away and when you've just sat with that experience for a while, until whatever concentration or inspiration that has come from that runs out. Then it's time to go on to the final phase of the sadhana, restarting the visualisation with Hrih in the heart. For a while we dropped everything to go with the pointing out instruction: now we resume the sequence of the sadhana.

and then in your own heart meditate both the letter HRIH and the mantra garland as being of light. From that, light emanates which stimulates the Compassion of all the Buddhas. Due to this we ourselves receive the blessing, while the benefit of beings is also accomplished. Meditating on that, recite as much as you can OM MANI PEME HUM.

So just to summarise, The mind is beyond words and concepts. We can't meditate on it using words and concepts. It's not constructed by the mind. It's not the small mind. It's when the small mind stops. That's the story-telling, constructing mind. We are telling ourselves stories about every experience, weaving it into the narrative of our life. That's a good approach to it. It's like recognizing that we have all sorts of assumptions and ways of explaining things that actually don't hold very well. And the meditation is really about sitting with the paradoxes of that or the weirdness of that and just letting go. And with an expectation or a trust or a *śraddhā* that some sort of realization is going to come out of that, putting yourself in that position. With such a thing you can only do so much. There is a certain period that you are able to keep this up, and after a while, the moment has gone.

That's when you go back to the visualization, the mantra recitation and the attitude of compassion with the Om Mani Padme Hum: *in your own heart meditate both the letter HRIH and the mantra garland as being of light. From that, light emanates which stimulates the Compassion of all the Buddhas. Due to this we ourselves receive the blessing, while the benefit of beings is also accomplished.*

As Sangharakshita explained this to me, the light emanates from the heart and the six letters of the mantra garland, then simultaneously flows up to the crown inviting the compassion of all the Buddhas through Amitabha, and from above down to our heart as blessings that flow out to the six realms of samsara. So there is a double flow: a prayer flows from our heart to Amitabha's and a blessing response flows from his heart down through our heart and from there out to all beings. If you like, to complete what the author of the sadhana says, all the Buddhas could also be visualised above Amitabha sending down blessings.

So at the heart is the central Hrih, which is radiant, sonant light of a beautiful red colour: ‘sonant’ because the sound Hrih is heard simultaneously with the visual appearance of the letter. The Hrih, and the syllables that surround it, can be visualised in any script. Roman is acceptable as well as the usual Tibetan.

It is worth reflecting for a moment how this visualisation of sound-syllables expresses the compassionate heart of Avalokitesvara. Nowadays more than ever we live in a world of words. Our habitual facility in reading letters to construct words and meanings is so strong and automatic that we miss the way that each letter works as a sound symbol with multiple potential layers of meaning. This marvellous quality of meaningfulness in words, letters and sound would probably have been more apparent in an earlier age, but it remains, and its magic is what animates this kind of visualisation.

Around the red Hrih is the ‘mantra garland’ – the letters Om Ma Ni Pa dMe Hum arranged around it like tiny moons orbiting a central sphere. They decorate it like a garland of flowers, standing upright not in a static manner but alive, animated from within. The colour of each letter’s sonant light connects it to one of the six realms of samsara.

Om is white for the Devas.
Ma is green for the Asuras.
Ni is yellow for the Human realm.
Pa is blue for the animals.
dMe is red for the pretas.
Hum is blue-black for the hells.

As we recite or hear the mantra sound, the ‘nectar light’ emanates and flows as I described. This flow expresses how *due to this we ourselves receive the blessing of Amitabha while the benefit of beings is also accomplished* as we recite as much as (we) can *Om Mani Padme Hum*. Finally, when the practice is over (and remember this has also been described in the main commentary above), and *enter into activity imagine the place where you live as being Deva-Chen or Sukhavati and yourself as being the servant of the Bhagavan, the protector Amitayus. Yourself being actually the Jowo Mahakarunika, the great compassionate one*. This sounds good doesn’t it? *Having the self-assurance or pride of being the lord Mahakarunika*.

Once you have generated that kind of feeling or attitude, then never be separated from it in your daily activities. If you constantly practise like that, in this life you will live long and all obstacles to your practice will be pacified (overcome). In your next life you will be born in Devachen and will quickly accomplish the actual manifest complete state and the practice of Awakening.

Once you have generated that kind of feeling or attitude, then never be separated from it in your daily activities. Keep up your connection to the atmosphere of Mahakarunika in daily life. Stay mindful of the kind of sensibility expressed in his sadhana. Then In this life you will live long – you are likely to live in a healthy way and have much to live for – and all obstacles to your practice will be overcome.

So this is the way to practise the union of Great Compassion and Mahamudra. It comes from the profound oral instructions of the noble Sakyapas, whose student (Motom Sagye Jupur..?) made prayers to me (the author) in the year of the Male Fire Dog, in the fourth month, on the eighth day. Then I wrote down this text.

So as he says, *this is the way to practice the union of great compassion and Mahamudra.*

Practice session

Mantra chanting and Sadhana

This was one of our first sessions, early on in the retreat. I said: What I will do is to chant the mantra a bit. You can chant along with me if you'd like and when the chanting's died away we'll do a little bit of the sadhana. I won't do it in a very full way, I'll just lead through it simply and we'll do a little bit of the Avalokiteshvara visualization.

Okay. So get yourselves into your meditation posture. So we're going to be sitting for about a good 40 minutes. So this is like proper session of practice together.

With the drum:

*Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum*

Everything in our experience is by nature insubstantial, changing, empty of any final nature, of any permanent quality. It is as though transparent, and it is completely without any boundary, without edges and with no actual centre. So let go into this nature of things as though it were the blue sky. Let things lose their sharp definition and rest in your experience just as it is. Let your body relax. Be aware of the core of the body. Feel the way it bears down with its weight upon the cushion. Allow the chest to be spacious. Just experience the comings and goings of perceptions.

Now, let your awareness extend out down, down into the great earth beneath you. Even if you are sitting on the fifth floor, still you can connect to the earth. The great earth, infinitely populated by beings of all kinds. You have something in common with all of them. And empathising in that way you sit here as the noble, the mighty Bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara. You are seated

on a white lotus with a smile that is completely serene, completely calm, untroubled. Avalokitesvara is holding to his heart the wishing jewel, feeling the heart wish that all beings will find the way to let go dukkha. In his upper right hand he's holding a mala of crystal and on the left, a lotus with a jewel.

Okay. Let's not force the visualization, just let the possibility of it be there and focus on the feeling at the heart, because that's what Avalokiteshvara is all about. And however we're imagining the form of our body at this moment, we now reflect on the nature of that experience: *As forms in a glass, in a looking glass, deities in ourselves we image; Image and void conjoined are maya's dance. Dancer-like, divers costumes make him fair: Fair, comely, mirrored image of the mind.*

We are like a mirrored image of the deity. *We ourselves, as the body of the deity, are like the appearance of a reflection in a mirror. We ourselves are the dance of illusion, the union of appearance and emptiness. Beautiful like a dancer who appears in many costumes, a pleasing, lovely reflection of the appearances of mind.*

Now we focus our attention upwards with the request to Amitabha above our head. He's going to give a teaching. Amitabha speaks:

Dharma is what pervades samsara, nirvana, happiness and suffering.

And the root of all Dharmas is one's own mind.

In mind, there is no colour and no shape.

Being no thing by nature, it is empty of 'one' and 'many'

Being empty, it is free of arising, ceasing and dwelling.

Being free, it is unceasing clear appearance where all constructs (have) come to rest.

This mind of peace is great, unbounded, and free from all extremes.

Let go and relax into a state free from all mental activity.

At this point simply let go of the visualization and stay with your experience.

. . .

When the mind starts to move again, take the attention back to the heart. First to the jewel held in the hands and then inside the body to the core of the body and the central channel and the heart as part of that. In the heart space there's a beautiful *Hrih* symbol on a lotus. The *Hrih* is generating light, and around the *Hrih* we see the six syllables of Avalokitesvara's mantra *om ma ni pa dme hum*. *Om* sends white light to the deva realm. *Ma* sends green light to the asura realm. *Ni* sends yellow light to the human realm. *Pa* sends blue light to the animal realm. *Dme* sends red light to the preta realm. *Hum* sends blue black light to the hell realm and the light goes forth with the sound of the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum*

and if you like you can use a rosary or something just to recite the mantra to yourself.

*Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum*

The light comes down to the crown from Amitabha, down to the heart centre, down through the central channel and from the heart goes out to all beings everywhere, all beings whatsoever.

And all this happens without any effort. So Avalokitesvara is completely serene and relaxed, open and clear.

. . .

After a while, the mantra, sound, the visual impressions, visualizations, imagination, all just dissolve back and the practice just comes to an end, just very simply.

*By this good act may I and other creatures
Meet, in this life, long life, health and Sublime Dharma;
And, in the next, being born in the Sukhavati field
Swiftly attain the rank of Avalokita
With body, speech and mind never parted from the three identifications
of Deity, Mantra, and Jnana,
Acting for the welfare of beings by the power of compassion,
may we fulfil the course of action of the Jinas' lineage
At all occasions, whether Here, the Hereafter, or Between,
never let go the hook of compassion,
Of the best guide, the Guru Measureless Light,
be we preserved from all downfall in life or stillness*

So that's the end.

Practice session

Reading from the Avatamsaka Sutra before meditation

This took place before another of the very early practice sessions. I said: We're going to be sitting for fifty minutes. I've got some verses that I'll read at the start and then we'll just go into the practice. This time the practice is whatever you want to make of it, whatever you want to do at this time. I've got some lines from chapter 11 of the Avatamsaka Sutra. This is translated in the tradition of Dharma Master Hua.

In taking refuge with the Buddha,
I vow that sentient beings
Will perpetuate the Buddhas' lineage,
And bring forth the unsurpassed resolve.

In taking refuge with the Dharma,
I vow that sentient beings
Will deeply enter the Sutra Treasury,
And have wisdom like the sea.

In taking refuge with the Sangha,
I vow that sentient beings
Will unite and lead the great assembly,
All without obstruction.

When receiving and learning precepts,
I vow that sentient beings
Will skilfully learn precepts
And avoid all evil deeds.

When receiving the Acharya's teaching,
I vow that sentient beings
Will possess awe-inspiring deportment
And be true in what they do.

When receiving instructions from a Great Monk,
I vow that sentient beings
Will enter the wisdom of the non-arising of dharmas
And reach the stage of independence.

When receiving the complete precepts,
I vow that sentient beings
Will be endowed with all expedients
And attain the most excellent Dharma.

Ritual

Mahakarunika Sadhana Puja

In the evenings we generally did the sadhana and then a ritual of some kind. What follows is the Mahakarunika Mahamudra Sadhana in the form of a Sevenfold Puja.

You could probably do the sadhana, in exactly the way it is written down, in the form of a puja. I edited the text to make the words flow a bit better in the ritual, and also chose the parts I found worked best from the two translations.

I said: So the sequence of this puja, which I think will fit into the next twenty five minutes, is very much the same as the sadhana, as you'll see, since we've just been through the whole thing.

There's an initial going for refuge and a prayer, and then we chant the mantra. The way we're going to do that together is that I'm going to sing it and I hope that you'll join with me, though I won't be able to hear you doing that.‡ During the mantra chanting you can also make offerings if you like. Just as in the sadhana, we go through the verses of Sunyata, the opening up into emptiness, the visualisation of ourselves as Avalokitesvara, the reflection on Sunyata, the prayer to Amitabha and the pointing out instruction, and then the final visualization of the *Hrih* in the heart with the syllables of the mantra sending out light to all beings. And the way we'll do the mantra at that point is as though we're reciting it with our mala, not sung but muttered, and that can be unmuted and it doesn't matter about the echo, so that we can all hear one another in what's known as a 'cloud mantra'. And when that's over, the vision dissolves into light, merges into us all and there is a final dedication just as in the sadhana, because that's what this is.

Okay, let's start. And you can chant along with me because you've got the words right in front of you.

‡ Remember this was an online event. The technology of the time could not manage simultaneous singing without multiple echoing, so all the participants were muted.

Maha Karunika Puja

We sit here as in a pure land,
Around us, the sentient beings of the three realms,
Vast — Equal to the limits of space.
Ho!

From now until I gain awakening
I turn towards the Buddha, and the Dharma
And also the noble Sangha
To the greatest of these Noble Ones, I call
O quintessence of Great Compassion,
Expressed in skilful Play
To you, I call
To all my teachers, right to the Buddha, I call

Grant your blessing
That my mind turns to the Dharma
Grant your blessing
That my Dharma follows the Path
Grant your blessing
That the Path dissolves my illusion
Grant your blessing
That appearances arise as Dharmadhatu
Grant your blessing
That un-Dharmic thoughts don't arise
Grant your blessing
That love and compassion do arise

And that both Bodhicittas abundantly flower.

Om Ma Ni Pa Dme Hum

(chanting with offerings)

For the sake of all beings
Equalling the skies
Who have been my mother
I will gain unsurpassable awakening
I will practice this profound yoga
Path of all the Buddhas.

(x3)

Om svabhavasuddha sarvadharmasvabhavasuddho 'ham...

Emptiness (just sitting) meditation

From the limitless dimension, Dharmadhatu
A wish fulfilling throne of jewels
A lotus seat unspotted by samsara
A moon disc, perfect clarity and light
Is where I sit
Avalokitesvara, embodiment of all Buddhas
Am I.

The colour of spotless conch and water crystal
Whose very pleasant smiling face
Is calm and graceful
I hold my palms together at my heart
Above I hold a crystal mala
And a lotus with a jewel
Dressed in delightful silks and jewels
Handsome with my long dark hair and topknot.

I myself, as the body of the deity
Am like the appearance of a reflection in a mirror
Am myself the dance of illusion
Am the union of appearance and emptiness
Beautiful like a dancer appearing in diverse costumes
A comely reflection of the appearances of mind.
Above my head I feel the presence
Chief of all sources of refuge
You who unite the timeless awareness of the Buddhas
O well pleased Lord
Of the Lotus Family.

Precious teacher above me
Let me hear the pointing out instruction
O truly complete Buddha Measureless Light
Please look on me with a loving heart
Grant your blessing
To wipe away the obscurement of my evil acts
And quickly fill my stock of merit and wisdom
Grant your blessing
So pure samadhi may arise
Grant your blessing
That I swiftly gain Buddhahood.

Dharma is what pervades samsara—
Nirvana—
Happiness—
And suffering
And the root of all Dharmas is my own mind.

In mind there is no colour and no shape
Being no thing by nature
It is empty of 'one' and 'many'
Being empty—
It is free of arising, ceasing and dwelling
Being free—
It is unceasing clear appearance
Where all constructs come to rest
This mind of peace is unbounded and free
Let go and relax free from all activity.

Letting go (just sitting) Meditation

Now inside, within my heart
Upon a lotus moon
The letter *Hrih*
Encircling it is the mantra of six syllables
And light rays issue forth
Urging the Jina's compassion
For the welfare of the six classes of beings.

Om Ma Ni Pa Dme Hum

(Voiced in threes cloud style)

Offerings can also be made here (and elsewhere in the ritual). The vision dissolves into light and merges into us all.

By this good act may I and other sentient beings
In this life live long, have good health and meet the true Dharma

In the next, being born in the Sukhavati field
May we swiftly attain the mind of Avalokita.

With body, speech and mind seen always
As the deity, his mantra and jnana,
Fulfil all beings' welfare through the power of compassion
And accomplish all the deeds of Bodhisattvas.

In this life, the next, and the Bardo in between
May we never let go the hook of compassion
Of the Buddha Measureless Light
And be preserved from all downfall.

*Freely adapted by Kamalashila from the 'Sadhana of Mahakarunika and Mahamudra Conjointly,'
translations by Tillman Lhundrup and John Driver*

Practice session: Inner body 1

An identity shift

Explanation

I said: early on in the sadhana there comes a transition from our ordinary sense of ourselves, as we are now, to the self-visualisation in the main part of the sadhana as Mahakarunika. This is something we can rehearse as a separate practice.

First as usual we connect to the experience of our body. Then, and this can be done with the sunyata mantra, we recollect the emptiness in the body of any permanent self-nature, the context of *sunyata* allowing us to relinquish our ordinary habitual way of experiencing the body.

Then we take our attention to, and experience directly to any extent we can, the different energies of the body. This comes through the feeling in the energy centres at the crown, throat, heart, inner belly and root. We may also imagine at these *chakras* the appropriate seed syllables which, in the case of this sadhana, are: *Om* at the crown, *Ah* at the throat, *Hum* at the chest (either the general area or at the breastbone) and *Hrih* at the inner heart.[§]

Visualising our body like this anticipates the way the body of Avalokitesvara will manifest in the fully realised self-visualisation, as well as indicating something of its nature as *sunyata*. In the next stage we actually make that transition, identifying completely with Avalokitesvara's form and continuing with that identification into the main part of the sadhana.

Put in the simplest terms, the stages of the transition are: first, ordinary body to conceptual emptiness via the sunyata mantra; second, ordinary body to experiential emptiness via to the energy centres; and third, energy body to self visualisation via the shared energy centres.

In more detail, the first transition is from our ordinary perception of ourselves as identified with our body, to letting that idea go so that our body is no longer considered to be anything particular in itself, and also as not being 'mine'. In other words we loosen any identification with the body. Then secondly we take

[§] In the Mahakarunika sadhana the *Om* is white, *Ah* red, *Hum* deep blue-black and *Hrih* again red.

that process further into tactile, visceral experience by experiencing the somatic energies. The traditional yogic system of energy centres, flows and channels is a useful map or mandala of these energies known collectively as the subtle body (*shuksma-sharira, phra ba'i lus*). If we take our awareness to the crown, throat or heart areas, for example we feel, in each of these, different kinds of energy. There is a particular range of feelings and emotions latent at the throat for example, generally connected to expression (it being the source of speech). Anxiety can show itself there in feelings of constriction or a 'lump' in the throat. Feelings at the heart and crown centres are similarly important keys to our overall state. The crown being the topmost part is associated with the body overall, the throat with speech and communication, and the heart with the inner experience of mind/heart (Buddhism never separates these, using the term *citta* for both). With practice, this way of experiencing the body as a field of sensation and feeling becomes profoundly meaningful. The divisions we instinctively construct between body and mind, energy and mind, or body, speech and mind begin to lose their meaning. In ultimate experience, energy and mind are inseparably part of a single mandala. So at this point, we are in touch with what it means to be embodied in a way that applies not only to us, but to an awakened being like Mahakarunika. We can now imagine seed-syllables – *Om Ah Hum* – at the main energy centres of our body representing the awakened qualities of body speech and mind. This is the penultimate step before visualising ourselves directly as Avalokitesvara Mahakarunika.

In the comparison between our ordinary body, the body deconstructed and freed through sunyata, and the body manifesting the qualities of awakening there is a strong suggestion of the teaching of Buddha-Nature, the truth that each of us has the qualities of awakening in a latent, unmanifested form.

Practice

So close your eyes and be seated in a way in which the energy is unrestricted. So feel the sitting bones against the cushion and the weight of gravity going down on them, front to back, left to right. It's a very subtle kind of adjustment just to get into the territory of this practice: just see if you can see the difference, if there is a difference. The chest is nice and open, the shoulders and the whole body soft and relaxed. There is an inner lift from the sitting bones, right up to the crown. A gentle sense of uplift.

What we're going to be exploring in this first practice is what's called the central channel. It is an opening that goes from the perineum right up through the centre of the body. It is something we visualise as a means of connecting with the way the inner energies feel in meditation. So by taking your attention there, imagine it rising up from the base of the body like a tiny elevator shaft, a little in front of the spine to the first floor: the navel centre. It is quite a way back, as I

say, towards the spine and not quite level with the actual navel; it is supposed to be two fingers' widths lower down. There isn't a precise mapping of these chakras in the Buddhist system; you need to locate where it seems to be and practise with that until your experience becomes clear. Then continuing up the shaft from the navel centre (which also gets called hara, inner belly etc.), the next level is the heart centre which is wherever you feel the emotional energy of the heart, within the chest, then up to the throat and finally right up to the crown. That's the top of the skull especially the area that when we were a tiny baby was called the fontanelle, and it also extends to the centre of the brow, the location of the so third eye. So it covers the whole of the inside of the top of the skull.

Overall, we become aware of the various sensations, particularly the emotional and energetic potential at the crown, throat, heart, inner belly and perineum.

Now to explore the subtle body, feel that you are seated very solidly on the meditation cushion. Feel the fact that you are quite literally supported by the vastness of the earth, almost as though the earth was breathing through you, noticing each in-breath as though it's coming up from the earth and going back to the earth. If you can, really get into the mythic dimension of your being here, feeling that you can completely trust the earth goddess to support you, just as she supported the Buddha at the time of his enlightenment, when the demon Mara challenged his right to do such a thing, and she affirmed that having been there all the time, she'd witnessed his practice. If that's a step too far, simply remember you are seated on the earth surrounded by all living beings, living their lives.

It can help deepen the practice if you give it some context. But you don't have to; it's enough to simply relax and be present. Relax so that each breath does itself. The body knows how to breathe. The mind may throw up all manner of obstacles, but like the earth, the body can be trusted to settle eventually into doing what it knows.

The awareness of the central channel comes like that too. As the breath comes and goes, just have a bit more awareness of the inner core of the body. It is wherever you feel it: that is the spot. Just relax there and feel what is there, whatever sensations and feelings happen to be there as the breath comes and goes. That's all we're doing, we're just allowing the experience to unfold whilst staying with the breath and the body, quite still and at ease.

Once there is a little stability, we can explore the different energy centres. You just find that point in your experience of the central channel, just completely relaxing and let the feelings and the sensations there unfold. It is like a flower

unfolding – no doubt that’s why in some traditional diagrams the chakras are marked by lotuses with different numbers of petals. There's an unfolding lotus at the perineum, right at the bottom. There's another at the navel centre, just in front of the spine, and another one at the heart centre, and they're all different. And there’s the unfolding lotus at the throat; where it is exactly is for you to discover. There may be a point in the throat area where it feels like there’s a particular kind of intensity of feeling: it is potentially quite emotional, where our voice can feel strangled sometimes because it's tense there. So relax there, find the spot and remain open there so it can be like that unfolding blossom with its very own set of petals, sensations and feelings.

Give this as much time as you want. It's all a very natural unfolding. The body is still being breathed by the earth. And then when you're ready, take the awareness up to the crown just inside the top of the head. How does that feel? Maybe there’s a sense of unfolding like the thousand-petalled lotus, or more likely something more ordinary, but still it is interesting. It is often said that there can be a silvery, blissful energy at the crown. There may be a certain confusion of feelings there that we need to accept before there is any settling down or clarity.

So generally, let whatever feelings are there in the body be felt and be unfolded in their own way. I think with this practice today we are just making a start on learning the role of the subtle body in sadhana practice. And while you’re about it you might as well imagine that you are Avalokiteshvara sitting here serene, relaxed, very open, connected with his great compassion for the great earth. His hands at his heart holding, with the jewel, the wish that all beings will find a way to let go suffering. And if any of that makes it feel complicated in any way, just relax. I mention the sadhana visualisation to emphasise that that too can be completely natural, as natural as sitting here, a simple unfolding of our natural wish. Avalokitesvara's wish will be our wish too, when we eventually find our true nature.

So to whatever is happening at the navel, the perineum, throat, head, heart and the central core of the body’s energy, be still and receptive as you go through the stages of the sadhana, and it will increase the sense of being embodied as Avalokiteshvara. So that you can feel that his nature is really your nature, or at least you have a lot in common. Open up to this and maybe it’s not so hard to identify with the beautiful form, the beautiful garments and implements and the sense of beauty and serenity. That whole demeanor displays the attitude, the wish to truly benefit others, to bring to them what would really take them beyond suffering. You have that to unfold in your heart and eventually that feeling will naturally take you towards the inner guru, symbolised by Amitabha, who brings the ultimate realisation of dharma through his pointing out

instruction. And then around the central *Hrih*, on the six petals of the heart-lotus, are the six syllables of the mantra of Avalokitesvara: the *Om* is white and from the white *Om* there radiates beautiful light to the world of the gods. May we all be free from suffering! The green syllable *Ma* connects in the same way to the world of the competitive gods, the Ashuras. Its green light emanating from Avalokitesvara's heart helps them see what's needed for them to let go their addictions to jealousy, competitiveness and rivalry. The golden light of *Ni* flows to the realm of the human beings; to our realm, that of humans ravaged by all kinds of sufferings but in particular by faint-hearted doubt. The light brings a clarity that encourages us doubtful humans to let go our clinging to that particular obstacle. The blue syllable *Pa* sends out a beautiful blue light to the realm of animals, the realm where ignorance is very strong. We can know from experience how the conditioning of being a particular kind of body in a particular kind of world brings a particular kind of obscuration. So we allow each breath of blue *Pa*-light to enable animals to notice and let that go. Just as Milarepa demonstrated in the story of the deer and the hunting dog, even animals can awaken. And then the red syllable, *dMe*, sends out light to the world of deep addicted craving inhabited by the pretas and helps those tormented by those states to step back from what is feeding their suffering. And last of all the blue black syllable *Hum* goes out from our heart, i.e. from Avalokiteshvara's heart, to the realm of extreme suffering, the hell realm, where due to the poison, strong poison of anger and hatred, beings are tormented by what they've got themselves into. So Avalokiteshvara's light penetrating, enabling them a break, some respite in which they can see their strong clinging and let it go. *Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum* goes up to our crown, to Amitabha at our crown and light pours down again through our heart and out to the six realms. *Om Mani Padme Hum. Om Mani Padme Hum. ...* and as you recite the mantra internally or externally, keep the core of the body still, allow yourself to feel it and don't disperse the feeling. Let the feelings be felt.

And then it all starts to come to an end, we let it all go. And dedicate:

By this good act may I and other creatures meet in this life long life, health and the sublime Dharma and in the next being born in the Sukhavati field swiftly attain the rank of Avalokita, With body, speech and mind never parted from the three identifications of deity, mantra and jnana, acting for the welfare of beings through the power of compassion, may we continue...

Thank you.

Practice session: Inner body 2

The Vase breath

I said, We're getting to the point in the retreat where we have all settled into regular and longer practice. It's all happening a lot more naturally and the retreat feels a bit timeless: time is a different experience. That's a good time to do more of the sadhana, and generally just do as much practice as we can whether of the sadhana or other practices; everything we do will back up the main practice. And with the main sadhana practice we can decide to give extra time to those parts where we tend to skip over certain details. Those bits we are not so clear about could do with some extra attention.

So I thought we'd do another session of the sadhana; I'll lead through it a bit again. I don't like to say so much at this point, because now you all know the sadhana quite well and you don't need too many words, indeed you should be providing for yourselves independently. But just a few instructions are, I think, quite helpful. So like we did a couple of days ago, let's do a little bit more work on the inner body practice, making that shift through the post-sunyata deconstructed body to full identification with Mahakarunika. And we'll try something new as well: we'll try the beginnings at least of something that may help us experience that inner body more clearly, which is called the Vase breath. Some of you know this already.

So let the body become quiet, let it just become itself, just as it is naturally. If the mind is a bit speedy, simply notice that and let it be like that. The more you notice and accept, you create a kind of a container for the practice – so that eventually, over time, the whole body and mind come together. And it's usually over a fair amount of time, so take all you need. I think very often, maybe it's just me, but very often it seems to take a good 20 minutes to really settle into the body, including going right down to the earth beneath, getting a sense of its vastness spreading out across the world and supporting all living beings. Mahakarunika's compassion is infinite, so imagining beings populating the entire ten directions of space is the best context for meditating on him.

Anyway, at some point, take your attention right down to the base of the practice, the perineum or pelvic floor, and feel yourself kind of stacked up from that point. The spine, the front of the body and the back, continuing to the crown of the head, and the shoulders softening; and if you let go in the sitting bones and even let them spread out slightly, it's as though the whole body settles on that base chakra. From that point, if you tune in, you can feel the core of the body, the central channel as it is called. This is often described as some kind of tube,

but essentially it is a sense of space that can be felt through the centre of the body. As we saw the other day it comes up from the base, through that point opposite the navel towards the spine, and just there between those two energy points (the base and the navel centre) there's for me anyway, a sort of obscure unknown area. Bringing more awareness there, or just settling the awareness there more, can really bring the body awake. So then move in awareness up from the inner belly, up through the chest that's directly above, where Avalokitesvara's heart centre is. And then right up, through the throat to the crown, just inside the top of the skull, where it may feel bright and silvery; can be quite delightful. So that's a bit of an overview of the inner body mandala; take all the time you need to establish all that in detail.

So now we are a bit settled in that experience of the inner body we can try this vase breathing technique. There are two things here, first an introductory breathing exercise called the ninefold purification breath that prepares the mind and body, and which includes the vase breath, and secondly the vase breath as an independent practice. The purification breathing exercise can be useful to bring our awareness more into the territory of the central channel, but it may not always be necessary once our attention is more familiar with what is there. All this is, if you like, the more subtle aspect of the subtle body, and as with meditation generally, familiarisation is key. So this likely to take quite a bit of practice before it makes complete sense.

So we imagine that on either side of the space of the central channel, there are two more spaces: one to the left and one to the right. These are also channels for energy to flow. At this stage their location, shape or size does not need to be precise; we need to discover how it works in our body rather than impose something. These two channels open at the nostrils, and in this exercise we explore the way the breath flows by visualising on each side alternatively, the intake of breath moving up to the crown and down to the inner belly chakra. With your mind's eye you see the line of direction that the breath takes. I'll explain that in more detail shortly.

There is a technique where you lift the left arm and close the left nostril with a finger as you breathe in at the right one, and vice versa. By all means try this but the arm movement disrupts the energy flow in the meditation posture. It seems quite easy to do it without. The essential thing is to feel and imagine the air moving in, up and down in each side channel or space.

It is important to do this exercise in a way that doesn't create tension. It can have definite physical and mental effects. These can be good and that's why we do it. But be mindful because if done carelessly the technique can upset that somewhat precious subtle sense of body in ways that make it harder, not easier,

to meditate. You don't want that, so do this lightly and experimentally until you can be confident. On the other hand you're also bound to get it a bit wrong at first. So carefully notice the effects and adjust so that the result (once the body has calmed down after the disruption of the technique), is an enhanced physical harmony and a deeper sense of involvement in the meditation.

The full technique is as follows. Once the body and breath are steady, we breathe in at the right nostril and imagine the breath rising up from there to the crown, and then from there down the right side of the central channel to the navel centre where the in-breath is completed. Then the out-breath moves up from there having crossed over to the left side of the central channel, up to the crown again and then down emerging from the left nostril. After a couple of cycles of that we cross over and follow the in-breath from the left nostril and emerging at the right, for another three cycles. These first six breaths prepare us for the final three, in the final one of which we do the vase breath.

Now we follow the incoming breath as it enters both nostrils, flows up to the crown and down both sides of the central channel simultaneously to the navel centre. Then we follow the out-breath up to the crown and out the two nostrils. We do that for breaths seven and eight. On the ninth we hold the breath at the navel centre. Once it arrives down there we keep it still for a while with a three way hold. First the breath is stilled from below with a movement pulling up from the muscles at the pelvic floor. The anal sphincter is contracted and lifted a little. At the same time at the beginning of the process there's a movement in towards the navel centre from the navel itself, that pushes the held breath back towards the spine. And then a third comes down from holding in the chin, so the throat chakra is a little restricted. At the end the holding is just from above and below. And it is done just sufficiently to keep the breath still: there should be no forcing, and once you have its purpose clear, it can feel like quite a natural thing to do.

That is the initial stage. Vase breath may not be for everyone, so don't feel you have to even try it. It is useful for those who find the inner body work straightforward. It won't be useful for those who currently find that somewhat conceptual and alien, which is fairly common. If you feel it is for you, it will take a bit of practice and will undoubtedly feel awkward and forced at first. But if you have an aim for it to be natural at the end, the vase breath will come.

The reason why it's called the vase breath is that what is held feels as though it is shaped like a pot. Indeed, Evans-Wentz's early translations called it 'the Pot-shaped.'

So you hold the pot there for a while, as long as it is reasonably comfortable to do so. This depends on the health of your lungs so again, some of you need to take care; don't force. I can only do this myself for a short time, but that is beneficial. Comfort in the practice also depends on how relaxed the body is generally. So again, this comes with practice. Let the whole body relax around the hold. When it's time, end it smoothly with a gentle out-breath. Don't hold the breath so long that it explodes outwards with a great rush, because it's at the point when it's released that you need to have a lot of mindfulness. There's a sense you can gradually cultivate that the out-breath enters the central channel at the navel centre. So it's drawn down from the two side channels, is gathered at the navel centre and then allowed by this process to enter the central channel, bringing more energy to all the energy centres.

When you let go, keep an open heart and full awareness. Be ready to experience whatever it is like as you allow the energies to enter the central channel and feel what's happening at the different chakras. In experience, all these feelings may be hard to distinguish at first. There is much to explore, much to get used to. One important thing is adjusting to the fact that what literally happens to the breath is different from how you are directing it imaginatively. You may need to set aside any anatomical knowledge you may have of the process if it inhibits your ability to simply allow the experience to take its own shape.

People often find a similar issue with the initial purification breaths; since anatomically the in-breath doesn't literally rise to the crown before descending to the lungs we may feel we are being asked to do something impossible, and therefore untrustworthy. It is important to grasp that this is about our experience of the body, not what we know about it. So just trust the visualisation regardless of any such qualms. Then you may eventually notice a correspondence between that visualisation of the breath rising to the crown and the sensation of cool air as it flows through the nasal passages at the base of the brain. That sensation resonates with the crown centre; indeed the crown centre covers all the upper part of the head, reaching to the 'third eye' at the centre of the brow. So set aside any distrust arising from the fact that that the breath doesn't literally flow down side channels or enter a central channel. Though at first we focus on the sensation of the breath, it is about channeling energy – subtle energy that takes a while to be felt clearly. That is what flows. That is also what the channels are. And the whole system of flows, energy centres and energies is what we gradually tune into through the inner body practice generally.

[PARA on The result of the practice]

Practice session

Full lead through of sadhana

I said, Good afternoon everybody. We're going to be doing a 50 minute session of practice this afternoon, and I think it's time to do a full lead through the Avalokitesvara Sadhana. I think since we've gone through the sadhana now several times I think it'd be good to do a full visualization. So that's the plan.

So have yourself in the posture whatever posture that is. Get yourself ready, have those last few sips of coffee or whatever it is.

So as we're settling into the practice, settling into our seat, this is the time to recollect the environment around us. There are beings in every direction. Beings like ourselves, beings of all kinds. The sadhana says *I and the three planes of life, creatures equaling the skies without exception*. We are practising in the context of all beings including ourselves, and here we can connect with the truth that they are just like us: vulnerable, more or less deluded, and at the same time all of them with various potentials for awakening.

So it's in this context that we go for refuge to the Buddha, we go for refuge to the teaching of the Buddha, we go for refuge to the Sangha of practitioners who have awakened through the Buddha's teaching. So, in a way, recollecting that we are one who goes for refuge. In a way, that's our ground, our earth.

Then there's a prayer to these refuges. Let yourself absorb the meaning of these verses..

Supreme Teacher and the threefold precious Jewel, We prostrate and pray to you. Please bless my body, speech and mind, and that of all sentient beings. Grant your blessing that our mind turns to the Dharma; Grant your blessing that our Dharma follows the path; Grant your blessing that the Path dissolves our illusion; Grant your blessing that appearances arise as the Dharmadhatu. Grant your blessing that un-Dharmic thoughts do not arise; Grant your blessing that love and compassion do arise; Grant your blessing that both Bodhicittas be mastered; Grant your blessing that we quickly achieve the knowing state.

Then reciting three times,

For the sake of all beings, equalling the skies, who have been my mother, I will gain unsurpassable awakening. To this purpose I shall practise this profound yoga, The path of all the Buddhas.

Try to make this aspiration completely real and true.

Then, looking into the real nature of our experience of body and environment: *Om Svabhavasuddah Sarvadharmah Svabhava Suddho 'Ham.* All dharmas whatsoever are empty of self-nature including the dharmas of my experience. And by looking with the eye of *sunyata* our own body is transformed and can become Avalokiteshvara.

Your crown, throat and heart are marked by seed syllables and especially in the heart, the syllable *Hrih*.

All through this, reflecting on your appearance as like being a reflection in a mirror. Savour that illusory quality. Imagine yourself having the appearance of Avalokitesvara: pure white like crystal, dressed in beautiful garments, handsome with long dark hair, wearing jewels, seated on a white lotus. It's like an appearance in a dream. It might help to imagine that you're actually dreaming this. Your two hands are held to your heart with the bodhicitta wish expressed in the *cintamani*, holding the crystal mala, holding the lotus. You are breathing, holding at your heart Avalokitesvara's compassion for the world.

Above our head is the deep red Buddha Amitabha and to him we pray. Precious teacher, Buddha measureless light, look on me, please, with your loving heart and bless me so that I may purify all obstacles, cultivate merit and wisdom, and bring those qualities to completion and be established in them.

And then the blessing comes from Amitabha, he says *Dharma is what pervades samsara, nirvana, happiness and suffering and the root of all dharmas is one's own mind. In mind there is no colour and no shape. Being no thing by nature it is empty of one and many. Being empty it is free of arising, ceasing and dwelling. Being free, it is unceasing clear appearance where all constructs come to rest. This mind of peace is great, unbounded and free from all extremes. Let go and relax into a state free from all mental activity.*

So, sitting aware of your experience, letting go any, letting go all constructions that you're making. Whatever you notice happening, notice the constructed aspect of everything that happens you. Whatever mental states, whatever thoughts arise, that's fine. When you notice, see the constructed aspect, letting that go. See the labels, let the labels go. See the assumptions, notice that they are assumptions and let them go. If arising is what it does, just let whatever arise, naturally, without any obstruction.

After a while... Then comes again the the identification with Avalokiteshvara and the lotus at the heart. All of it is arising in the same spirit of emptiness that we have been letting to into. So *Inside my heart, on a lotus-moon, is the letter Hrih. Around it is the mantra of six letters. Light-rays issue forth urging the Jina's compassion To grant his blessings and perform the welfare of the six kinds of beings.* Spend as long as you like on that...

Now, over the next five minutes, start to bring the practice to an end. The vision of Avalokitesvara's body and the environment of the six realms of *samsara* merges with our ordinary sense of body and the environment we recognise as normal. We dedicate the benefit of the practice to the awakening of all beings.

Practice session

Simple arrival practice

I said, This is just a simple arrival practice. Arriving here on your meditation seat, and continuing to arrive, as it were, throughout the session.

All you have to do is sit down in your place.

Connect with the spine and the core of the body.

Feel the weight of the head and the shoulders, letting the chest open, letting yourself fully become present in your body.

And that's all really. The body knows how to breathe, the body knows how to settle down.

So from this point, just keep the mind on the body process.

2020-04-15 Avalokitesvara 11a - A few things to say about the practice

A few things to say about the practice

Tonight I've got a few things to say about the practice.

I have a way of doing the sadhana that I've been doing for a long time. I find that the practice can nearly always be explored from the current state that I'm in if I'm mindful of that. I'm feeling good, bad, indifferent, exalted, excited, overexcited, fried, dull, very grumpy, or very sensitive etcetera. I may have all of these moods at different times, and a lot of them may make me feel like not doing the sadhana at all. I feel like doing something else instead, and very likely not even meditating. I think that approach is necessary sometimes, to just take a break. But it's also necessary to deal with your stuff sooner or later. And it's possible with many of those sort of feelings, even the very difficult ones, to fit them into the way the sadhana works.

I try to exercise deep mindfulness of how the mind and body are and use the sequence of the sadhana to fit that somehow. It's not that easy to explain the particularity of that, because it's different every time. In general you kind of feel your way into the practice, using the structure of the sadhana to help find the way.

So it's not as though you practice with some sort of idea like 'I need to calm down,' or 'I need to become richer inside' or whatever you might tell yourself. You don't have a fixed idea of how it's going to go. You are feeling your way from where you are – from absolutely whatever state it is. Start grumpy, start over sensitive, start completely overcome by desire and distraction, if you can. Identifying with that point of view (I mean lightly, open to it changing), you just keep coming back to the practice and be (this is key) completely, viscerally, mindful of how you are. Recite the verses, step into emptiness and be Avalokitesvara like that, grumpy. Feel the contrast and also let that contrast purify that state. Grumpiness or whatever mind state it is, is empty of self-nature too, and you know that the self visualisation is not really, actually Avalokitesvara, so it's fine to do it feeling the difference between that ideal and the actual way you are. That is one of the purposes of self-visualisation.

So that's it, that's the approach I take. In a way of course, we always have to do it that way anyway because our mind is different in every moment – but it's a good idea to make that conscious.

I mention this as a better approach to the idea (that some of us grew up with in the Order) that you should make yourself do the sadhana as written; that you should do it as you're told. That is a forced approach that overrides how you are, seemingly in the hope that any undesirable mind states will be obliterated. What I am saying isn't that different. The advice is still to do the sadhana as received, but with the crucial difference that you don't attempt to suppress the current state. You acknowledge it deeply and stay with it mindfully, watching the changes. By acknowledge it deeply I mean recognize that this is a deep habitually ingrained pattern that will arise again and again until the clinging it is based upon is relinquished through insight.

So instead of imposing the form of the sadhana on our experience in what might seem even a violent way, we use any feeling of incompatibility or resistance, anything like that, as a sign that we need to slow down and play. That is to play with experimental ways so as to discover how a particular aspect might work better, or how we can accommodate ourselves to it, or even maybe we'll skip it for now, or we won't do so much on it for now. Whatever you do, you keep the initiative and stay mindful. This way, you do still get to do the formal sadhana but it ends up shaped to how we actually are, which is a much better result. It's better because it's based on mindfulness: mindfulness of body sensation, feeling and also reactions.

Body awareness can be the main focus either throughout the practice or mainly at the beginning as I've been leading you into the sadhana, alongside the setting up of the posture and the environment with all the beings around, the sense of the lineage of practice, the sense of the presence of Avalokitesvara, all going on in the background of the practice.

I asked: Any thoughts about that?

Someone said, Yes, when you say 'stay with the body,' do you mean in the sense of it being connected to the earth, or do you mean in terms of the sensations within the body?

I said, I meant in terms of direct awareness of the sensations in the body, and the feelings, and the mind state. The connection with the earth and other beings is more imaginative, to do with setting up the general scope of the practice, though you may feel that quite strongly.

They said, Thanks a lot. I think that really helps to counter a kind of perfectionistic attitude that I think I have had to my practice. Like I've got to be

in the right or perfect mind state before I can do sadhana properly and it's like all or nothing. So this really helps with that.

I said, Well, you've got to adjust, haven't you, to what's there. So it's really about that. Shall we do it then?

practice session

Sadhana in stages

A useful reference for doing the sadhana on a daily basis is its main stages.

- 1) Setting up the posture, connecting with the earth and all living beings.
- 2) Taking refuge and asking for the blessing of the teachers.
- 3) Making the Bodhicitta vow to practice for the sake of all beings.
- 4) The mantra of sunyata.
- 5) The self-visualisation.
- 6) The prayer for blessing to Amitabha at the crown.
- 7) Receiving the pointing out instruction and letting go.
- 8) Visualising at the heart Hrih and the mantra, and reciting that.
- 9) Dissolving the visualization and the environment.
- 10) Dedicating the benefits of the practice to all beings.

practice session

Final evening: Stages of the sadhana, Discussion, Final puja and Conclusion.

Hello everybody – good evening, this is our final evening. We are going to start with half an hour meditation, then half an hour of talking, then half an hour groups and half an hour puja. That's the evening. Can we have a five minute break for clapping at 8 o'clock? (During the first wave of Covid in the UK, especially in London where I was then, it was a custom for everyone to go out into the street and applaud the work of NHS nurses, ambulance drivers and doctors.)

Okay so start settling down in meditation.

Allow your mind to settle but recognise that this may be a long-ish process, at first you have to allow your thoughts some space to have their say. As you do that recollect the environment of all beings, all beings that we're related to in so many ways on this great earth...

Just letting all that sink in once more. It's an important basic part of the practice. just relaxing and settling with the reality of all other living beings around us, and our connection to them. What do you feel for them?

Feel the core of the body which we share with all beings...

And with this in mind we go for refuge to the three jewels and we ask for their blessing in the practice of the Dharma...

And we make the vow to practice, for the sake of all beings, to awakening...

And now the mantra that introduces or reveals sunyata...

Then out of the clear unbounded Dharmadhatu we arise as Avalokitesvara...

The form of Avalokitesvara is as though seen in a glass, in a looking glass, like a reflection...

And with this sense of the visualisation, we feel the presence of Amitabha, ask for his blessing and receive the pointing out instruction...

Then just sit with the effect of that instruction...

Then right within our heart on the lotus moon is the letter HRI surrounded by the six syllables. Recite the mantra and send blessing to all...

After a certain point, the vision fades and dissolves...

Experiencing that transition, make the resolve to carry on in some way into daily life, with the dedication.

We had our 8pm break. I said, I blew a conch for the NHS! it was my chance to blow it, yes people let off fireworks and everything. We had people clapping on the station platform down the bottom of our garden (in North London). Someone said, We do that in France too, but it's 8pm our time, so it was an hour ago. I said, Oh, you do the same, that's great.

I said, So this is a time when we can talk about the practice and about the retreat. I wonder if there are any things that you'd like to talk about? And we've got, well, twenty-five minutes or something like that. I'm sure it'll go quite quickly.

'Yeah, hi, can I just get a couple of little technical questions out of the way first? About the detail of the practice. So, the Hrih in the heart, yeah, so does that sit on a white lotus and moon mat? I'm guessing it does.' I've always guessed it did as well, I said. That's all; I don't actually know. Maybe someone here does? Someone thought that it was a white lotus tinged with pink at the edge of the petals, signifying purity and compassion, but maybe, they said, they'd made that up somewhere along the way. I said, Things like that don't matter too much. It has come out of someone's practice. The whole sadhana once came out of someone's practice, and that understanding of the lotus has come out of yours at some point. There are always small differences between people's practice like that. Some essential points you shouldn't mess with, but things like that are fine.

Another question: After the pointing out instruction there's uh, I forget the wording... it's something like some light or blessings pour down from the Jina (Amitabha) but my understanding, reading it, is that the light that radiates out to all the realms, it's actually Amitabha's compassion. Is that how you understand it too? I said, yes certainly it is imbued with compassion, it's all the movement and particular quality of compassion coming down from above and

going out. But (this occurs to me) it's coming down from above because it's being requested – so you can also see it as being drawn down by our request. You can also see it as being drawn out by the need of all the beings out there, who are kind of drawing blessings down through you and Amitabha. There's all these different ways you can experience it. So there's a bit of leeway there for our creativity about how it works. Great, they said, that was it for the moment. Thank you.

Another person said, I have a question about your email from yesterday. Could you say something about how you visualize the stages as a background focus?

To the reader, the following may seem initially like a bit of a diversion, but to understand the context of this question about 'focus' we need to see the email I'd sent out to everyone the previous day. This (pasted below) sets out some suggested approaches. The first part relates to what I said earlier in 'a few things to say about the practice.' The questioner here is asking about the second part which is about foreground and background focus in visualisation.

Begin forwarded message:

From: Kamalashila Matthews <...>

Date: 15 April 2020 at 12:08:39 pm BST

Fitting the practice into your current mind/body state

When we sit for the sadhana practice we should exercise deep mindfulness and use the unfolding sequence of the sadhana in a way that fits how we are without fixed assumption that we know precisely what we need.

Allow your experience of the body-mind to determine what aspects of the sadhana are emphasised.

This allows a variety of approaches, for example (just a suggestion)

Body awareness can be the main focus either throughout or for an initial period, with the setting up of the environment [all beings, lineage, presence of Avalokita] going on 'in the background' while that is going on.

'Foreground/background' is a technique that's integral to visualisation, if you think about it. So it can be consciously employed in a variety of ways. For example the visualisation of the body as Avalokita's body can be the main focus, but often it needs to be the background focus, since other aspects of the Sadhana are coming into play like the reflection on the mirror like quality. Looking at the sadhana as you do it, try playing around with some of these ideas today and tomorrow.

<u>In this part of the Sadhana Sequence...</u>	<u>...This is perhaps the main focus</u>	<u>... and this is what's maybe going on in the background</u>
Environment, Taking Refuge, Lineage prayer for blessing and clarification of purpose	Posture	Visualisation of these stages ->
Vow: For the sake of all beings equalling the skies...	Inspiration of Vow	Posture
Recollecting Emptiness: Sunyata Mantra	Looking at immediate sense experience	Relaxation of body and mind
Visualisation: Out of the clear unbounded Dharmadhatu, a throne of jewels..	Posture	Visualisation
Recollecting Emptiness: As forms in a glass...	Posture	Visualisation
Visualisation: Prayer to Amitabha	Inspiration of request	Posture
Recollecting Emptiness: Pointing Out	Looking at immediate sense experience	Relaxation of body and mind
Visualisation: Heart Lotus and Mantra	Posture	Visualisation
Recollecting Emptiness: Dissolution of visualisation	Looking at immediate sense experience	Relaxation of body and mind
Visualisation: Final dedication	Purpose	Posture

In answer to the question I said, This division into the foreground and the background of what we're doing in the sadhana is about looking at how we use our imagination, when we are often doing several things at once – like setting up the posture at the same time as doing the opening stages of the sadhana. For example, I said, right now, in my process of trying to imagine the answer to this question there's all kinds of stuff going on in the background and in the foreground of my awareness, and it's the same for you as well. So this is really just working with that. There are some things that we are definitely focusing on,

whereas at the same time there are other things which are carrying on as it were on their own, without us having to do anything about them.

So, in my experience, in the very first part of the sadhana when I'm imagining all beings all around me, in some ways I don't need to do very much active imagination because I already know that all beings are there. So I tend to focus much more on the body process and I'm just relaxing with that. That's my foreground focus, my main focus. It's easy for me to do that while recalling that I'm (literally) surrounded by all beings. So that's just one example if you recall that chart I sent out in the email. I just really wanted to encourage you to look into the way that the mind does things, because in a way that's part of what the sadhana is about. That is, it's about realising the nature of mind. So I don't really want to go into the specifics of different things you could do because it may not appeal to everybody, may not work, or it may not even make sense to everybody. But at the same time I think there are elements you can focus on and allow other things to almost do themselves and you can play with that throughout the whole sadhana. Maybe others can think of other examples. So I hope that's some kind of answer to your question.

They then said, So I'm taking it that all the visualisation aspects of the practice are things that just do themselves for you? Is that correct? No, I said, not at all. Some are, some aren't, it all depends. But, they asked, All of the visualisation is in the background focus in your table? No, normally you want to concentrate on some aspect of the visualisation, such as the imagination of oneself as Avalokitesvara. You concentrate on the form, that's the main focus. Your own body being Avalokitesvara's body is the main focus, it is like simply the meditation posture. But you're still in touch with what's happening in the background, which in that case would be the details of how that ideally is to be seen, i.e. with four arms etc.

OK I asked, Does anybody else either want to contribute to that particular point or make another one?

Someone said, I wanted to ask a question to do with the dissolving at the end. In other sadhanas I've done, it's very explicit, the dissolving of the figure, and there's different ways to dissolve it. But this one seems to be saying you just – you know, being a bit literal - you just dissolve the lotus and the mat. It leaves it a bit open about everything else. So I'm curious because my sense from how you've done it, you say just dissolve everything. And I'm just wondering whether I'm supposed to dissolve the visualization or stop making an effort at creating the visualization.

I said, The instruction is *Then, at the end of the session, we think of the seats as turning into rays of light and merging into ourselves.* It doesn't explicitly say that you continue into post-meditation still fully identified as Mahakarunika, but there's a suggestion that you might be. I don't interpret it like that though. The way I understand it is that everything in the sadhana, the feeling of it I mean, is taken back into ordinary life, and that in ordinary life you try to act in a way that is receptive to the inspiration of the sadhana.

In addition to that, which is the intention of how to practise, there is the actual experience of dissolving the visualisation. You experience the dissolution and you experience whatever you're left with. Just observe that process. That seems to be the most important thing. Just observe how at one point you're visualising something and at another point you're not – it's different isn't it, and there's a kind of learning in that. It's a bit like this foreground and background awareness; it's all rather mysterious and indescribable. It can't adequately be described. The dissolution first into and later on out of emptiness is an exercise in experiencing that.

Yes, I mean, the questioner asked, Do you think there's a specific point it's trying to make in the way the sadhana is written, the fact that it only explicitly says, dissolve the lotus and mat and throne, whereas some other sadhanas explicitly say that you dissolve the figure, or the figure condenses and, you know, shoots into you, or – you know, there are all these different scenarios – but here there seems to be some suggestion that you might just carry on as Avalokitesvara.

I said, well that wouldn't be inconsistent with compassion type of practices in general. The dedication verses do indicate that you carry on in some way, as in, you know, Never let go the hook of compassion of Amitabha, and a few other things as well. So it's like an attitude, but then it's like the attitude and then whatever else you're left with when you have concluded the visualization. You're kind of left with some flavour, and that's what carries on.

I mean, it might be difficult to go around, literally, imagining yourself as Mahakarunika with four arms. So I think it's a little bit up for grabs.

I said, To me, at least, these practices allow me to experiment a bit with the way I experience my life. It really makes you question what your experience is and what is happening and so on. That all seems to be a very good thing. I relate that to the refuge tree, the prostration, where at the end all my parents and all beings are not dissolved. I carry on going with them next to me. I've always understood that you quite explicitly don't dissolve Avalokitesvara. You're not wandering around in that specific form, but you are dedicated to becoming and manifesting the power of compassion in whatever way you can in your life. And

I've also explicitly understood that you don't dissolve Amitabha. That you're always, in a way, serving the Amitabha who you're carrying above you as it were, that you're always in some relationship. I'm not suggesting that that's easy or that one does it in a very literal way, it is metaphorical. But yes, I guess that's how I've always understood that. It's really implied by the dedication verse isn't it? And obviously these things shouldn't be understood that literally, but it's just a sense of it, isn't it, and if you feel that, if that's what you want to do in essence, then that's going to carry on with you somehow. And that's very powerful.

Someone asked, I was just wondering about the hook. I know, this might be me being literal, but do you see it as a hook? Why is it a hook?

I said, It's a hook because it hooks you in. That's what it's all about. It's about, some of these Compassion Bodhisattvas do literally hold hooks. What's her name, Kurukulle, a dakini. She has a flowery hook and she kind of hooks you in. She's a hooker; she's all about attraction and the power of attraction. So the hook is a metaphor for the attractive power of awakening, not one we use like that so much in western culture, but you can understand it. The possibility of awakening is something it's easy to see as desirable, inspiring, exciting even.

Okay. But I mean, do you see it as a hook?

No I don't really. I would find that quite strange if it was a hook coming down from above. Maybe down through the centre of my brain? I don't think so. That doesn't really feel at all attractive. But you can see the metaphor of something which kind of draws something to you.

I think magnetism is better. We have this idea of magnetic attraction. If you said the magnet, the magnet of Amitabha that might be better because you're like a fridge magnet, you're stuck on him, you can't keep off him. Ah fridge magnet, they said, That'll work, thank you!

Someone else said, There is also an eight-arm Avalokitesvara called Amoghapasha, who either has a lasso or has rope with a hook. Ah yes, I said, that is another Avalokitesvara connection, and I think in the thousand-arm Avalokitesvara practice that some Order members do, there are hooks or lassos going out to all sentient beings. Another person said, Yes a lasso like a cowboy's lasso! Kurukulle has one of those as well. She has a lasso and a hook as well. Another person said, I always think of the hook as a way of attaching, because if you're visualising a figure out there – you know, the figure is separate and you're visualising – the hook is like an easy point of union, it's not just in your visualisation, it's actually a joining point. If the hook's in there, it's got you, instead of it sort of slipping away. I said, Yes (and maybe we shouldn't spend too long on this) – another part of the image is you're being rescued and the

'hook' is something you can hang on to, and it draws you out of the pit of your attachment. I think that's part of the image as well.

Any questions about something else? Yes said someone, I have a question regarding the vast breathing. Is there circumstances in which you'd advise us to do or not do it?

I said, I think you need to experiment. It depends so much on your physical state really. I think sometimes it may be helpful if you're the sort of person who needs lots of stimulation to stay with the practice, I don't mean if you're just a bit tired, but if it's common for you to be in heavy sloth and torpor, it may be helpful as an aid. I'm not like that at all, I only have to do the vase breath very slightly and I'm quite stimulated. It's quite stimulating isn't it? It's quite a magical sort of practice. Once you get into it a little bit, it's like turning a light on inside your body in a certain way. Because it can perk up the practice in that way I think you can kind of misuse it as though it were a drug; you can focus on it too much, maybe that's a bit of an area to highlight. I find you can start associating it too much with the meditation when you should get on with the other aspects of it. But it's pretty hard to make rules I have to say. To me the association is particularly with visualisation practice. The vase breath comes from the Yogas or Dharmas of Naropa. It is the sort of practice Milarepa used to do. There's a whole set of these practices which relate not only to the Vajra body, that is the inner or subtle body, but also to the body in the bardo and lots of practices to do with death as well. So there's quite a lot of esoteric, Tantric associations with this kind of practice. But the way we're doing the vase breath, it just seems straightforwardly beneficial for posture, for letting go distraction and for enhancing the visualisation practice. Maybe others have got questions about this as well. It's a bit of a new area, isn't it?

Another person said, Your version of the vase breathing seems a lot gentler than Lama Yeshe's.** I said, Yes I think I'm very gentle with it. I've been taught it in ways which were not particularly gentle and I learned from the contrast. That's why I say it seems it seems to depend on people's physique. I was on a retreat this time last year, a three month retreat, and there were some people who were doing these Tibetan Trulkhor exercises. I joined their group for a couple of days, and in the course of one of the sessions, we must have done the Vase breath about sixty times, and really strongly – deep deliberate breathing and long holding of the breath. It didn't suit me at all – I was completely overstimulated and didn't sleep for two days. It was really far too much, it really messed up my whole system! But that approach was working for them, and they were sensible people, a man and a woman. Both were physically quite strong and tended to dullness in their practice, they said. So you do have to be careful.

** in his book *The Bliss of Inner Fire*

Another person observed, So you came to this particular version through your own trial and error? I think all practice is like that, I said. I'm sure the person who taught me in person, briefly, had learned it through his own trial and error as well as having learned it from his own teachers. That was Lama Tillman, though I had been picking up ways of doing it since the early years, that is the 1980s, at Vajraloka. It was Karunachitta who personally taught me the purification breathing.

I was asked, Kamalashila in your introduction to the sadhana, you talked about Shiva and Avalokitesvara as ascetics. Can you say a bit more about that? Maybe it's a bit fanciful, I said, but I was just trying to explore what kind of an image we have of Avalokitesvara. To me the description of him with piled up hair and a deer skin over his shoulder evokes the image of a Yogin. He does look a bit like Shiva, too. There are some traditional connections between Shiva and Avalokitesvara and they look a bit similar in some ways. Sangharakshita once spoke of a connection in that both are said to be 'blue-throated' because they take on the poison of the world. Parami is nodding, so maybe she knows something about it. 'Yes a couple of years ago I talked to Bhante about the blue-throated Avalokitesvara practice. We talked about how I could make it a practice. There was a particular time where it felt helpful, and he said then that it was connected with a form of Shiva. There was a figure that looked very similar and both had the blue throat. He thought probably it was more of a Hindu figure than a Buddhist one but that he had found it helpful and useful to visualise it like that, but he didn't think that feature was a traditional Buddhist practice.' How interesting, I said. Another person chimed in, I was going to say that I had a talk with Lokamitra about this when I was out in India with Bhante in 1978 or 79. And Lokamitra was saying that he'd been trying to do Avalokitesvara but Shiva kept coming up, and I said that's interesting because since I've been in India, I've also been doing Avalokitesvara and I've been getting Shiva coming up too. And I'm just wondering if when you're in India, it's easier to pick up on this stuff.

That was the end of the discussion.

We concluded the evening with the Mahakarunika Puja.

OM MA NI PAD ME HUM.

My concluding remarks were, Well, I think this has been a great retreat and I really appreciate the fact that people put so much into it and stuck with it and worked on their practice in these conditions. And I must say, I personally haven't found it difficult to do that. I found it really encouraging to be with you

all. And I feel that over the week, we made a real connection. And isn't that amazing? So I'd like to thank you very much and I wish you all well for the next bit, whatever that might be. And this evening I won't close down if you want to chat with each other. I'll just leave it open.

