

# The Merits of Cleaning a Temple

**Tulku Thondup**

This discourse on the merits of cleaning a temple is based on a text by the Third Dordrupchen Rinpoche.<sup>1</sup> This astonishing piece of literature consists of fourteen folios and is a testimony to the fact that everything the Dordrupchen touched turned to gold. I do not intend to translate Dordrupchen's text line-by-line, or even page-by-page, but simply to summarize some of its main points. Dordrupchen divides his text into two sections: the benefits of cleaning a temple, and how to go about doing that cleaning. He divides the text in this way because he believes that if we really understand the benefits of cleaning it will excite us and that inspiration will be the catalyst for actually doing the cleaning.

Cleaning the temple is part of our spiritual work at a Buddhist center. We may go to a centre, find that it is our turn to clean and react adversely thinking, "Oh, but I don't like cleaning the temple." Some of us have never even touched the temple. We do not want to be burdened by this task, considering it beneath our professional work or studies or whatever. At other times we may clean the temple, but we fail to see any virtue in doing so. We convince ourselves that it is a necessary social service and simply condescend to clean it because nobody else will. However, even though we acknowledge that cleaning the temple may be necessary, we harbor resentment about it and proceed to do so only for the sake of social nicety. It

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<sup>1</sup> gTsug lag khang phyag dar gyi gnam bsod nams sprin gyi rnga sgra zhes bya ba bzhus so by Jigme Tenpe Nyima (1865-1926). Dordrupchen Sunbum Vol. Cha, page 151-178. (Published by Lama Sangye.)

is important to understand that there are other people who approach cleaning with ‘inspiration, joy, dedication, and pure perception,’ as the Buddhist teachings say.

I have chosen this topic so people will at least leave the temple neat and clean, without leaving garbage, dust or meditation cushions in disarray. That approach is like going to a huge fair in a big city, where the following day the whole environment is filled with broken cups, bottles and other rubbish. Despite this obvious comparison, most people clean the temple without any kind of excitement or devotion. If we know the virtue, merit, and purpose of cleaning, we will be able to appreciate the task as a privilege rather than a burden. It will no longer seem like dirty work, but an opportunity to practice meditation in a unique way. It might even become an amazing source of benefit and a way for us to grow in spiritual, mental and emotional strength. It then becomes similar to doing prostrations and circumambulations, because these things are all physical and mental exercises in devotion.

Some of you may remember when an important Rinpoche came to our temple to see Kyabje Dodrupchen Rinpoche. There were about forty, fifty people with him, and none of them used the bathroom that is attached to our temple. Even Rinpoche availed himself of the little out-house in the woods. Rinpoche expressed that kind of respect, dedication, and devotion as an example to his students. He did not need to do it for his own benefit but in order to maintain the cleanliness of the temple. If Rinpoche himself refused to use the inside toilet, all fifty of his students had to do the same. All of this has a very specific purpose, and I have chosen this subject matter from the Dodrupchen Rinpoche’s text in order to clarify that purpose.

## **Cleaning as a Analogy for Transforming our Lives**

It is important to clarify from the outset that this is not the only method of Buddhist meditation. There are hundreds of different ways of training. Cleaning the temple then, is not *the* Buddhist meditation; it is just one of the many ways of developing our spiritual experiences.

It is not just the business of cleaning a temple that is at issue here. The principles that we are about to discuss can be applied to cleaning anything and anywhere; even in our own homes. In fact, we could take this topic further and use the analogy of temple cleaning as a way of transforming different aspects of our lives and utilizing everything that we do as part of our spiritual practice. If we can transform the cleaning of a temple into a meditative or spiritual exercise, we can do the same with our own shrine room and gradually extend that to all our activities, whether that be cooking in the kitchen, gardening in the lawn, washing the dishes, or even taking a shower.

It is also important to understand what we mean by the term ‘temple.’ From a popular perspective, a temple is a place where we get together and meditate, receive teachings, and keep Buddhist images, and scriptures. It is a house or a building especially dedicated to spiritual practices. When our meditation practice matures however, anywhere and everywhere can become a temple. If our mind is in meditation, our bathroom and kitchen become a temple through the power of that meditative experience. If we are experienced meditators, a temple does not have to be some kind of reserved place, it can be anywhere. Our own body can become a temple, because a temple really means a place of devotional exercise, a place where we have pure perception, a place where we have an awareness of peace, calmness,

and joy. Anywhere that those spiritual qualities are present is a temple. From that perspective, whatever we clean becomes the cleaning of a temple.

### **The Importance of Working with External Phenomena**

The Third Dodrupchen points out that we do not clean a temple for the sake of the Buddha. The Buddha does not care if the temple is clean or dirty; the Dharma does not care. The important point to remember is that cleaning is a device for bringing about a "clear mind." That clear mind is both the means and the goal of this cleaning practice. "Clear mind" then, is the main point to remember.

Buddhism constantly reminds us that any good karma or spiritual realizations we might make for ourselves are to be utilized for becoming a proper vessel for serving others. If we want to help others we have to improve ourselves. If we have not improved ourselves, it is impossible to become a proper vessel for serving others. In order to succeed in this, we have to understand that the body is just a vehicle for the mind. The essential thing is the mind, because the body will do whatever the mind thinks. Therefore, if you want to help all sentient beings, or even one sentient being, you have to improve your mind.

Our problem is that we are born with the inveterate tendency to fixate on and be swayed by external phenomena. You may or may not agree with this point. You might be thinking, "I'm a great meditator, I don't do that." However, I think it is true that we are all slaves to external phenomena, because we always forget who we are; we forget about the true nature or true quality of the mind and in so doing become seduced by external phenomena. Therefore, if we want to change our lives we have to start with external things, because that is where the problem lies. If you want to get to Vermont,

you first have to cross Massachusetts. In the same way, if you want to realize the true quality of the mind, you first have to release yourself from the external traps in which you have become entangled. While the mind is the most important thing, we have to begin our spiritual journey by practicing with external phenomena.

Another point to bear in mind is our tendency to go to extremes with anything we do. You may think, “Saying mantras and doing sitting meditation are the main point of spiritual practice, I’m not interested in cleaning the temple as part of that practice.” Some people become so materialistic they start to think, “The material things that you provide for others are more important than cultivating generosity in your spiritual practices.” Or they go to the other extreme, “If I have the attitude of generosity I don’t have to do anything for others.” We always have an excuse for not doing things in a balanced way. Nonetheless, the most important part of our spiritual practice is to find a real and genuine balance. At this point in our spiritual development then, it is crucial to begin with externalized practices such as cleaning meditation.

### **Cleaning a Temple for Mental Purification**

Dodrupchen states that the whole spiritual purpose of cleaning is to realize all the stages of spiritual insight and ultimately attain Buddhahood. Such realizations can only come about if our mental, emotional, and karmic obscurations are purified. That is why purifying the mind is just as important as the realizations themselves, for without that purification, spiritual insight will be impossible. It is this process of purification therefore, that is the main focus of these teachings.

The Dodrupchen begins by quoting the life story of Chudapanthaka (Tib., Lam phran brtan) one of the sixteen Arhats from Buddha Shakyamuni's time. Chudapanthaka was very dumb before he became an Arhat. He was ordained into the Sangha at Jetavana, where Buddha lived for twenty-four summers, but was so stupid that he could not learn or memorize even one word of the Dharma. The Sangha eventually decided that they could not have him as a member any longer. This was an ethical decision rather than a reflection of their lack of compassionate or unwillingness to help him. The Sangha lived on the offerings of devotees; offerings that consisted mainly of food because the monks and nuns of those times did not own anything except their robes and a begging bowl. The lay people made offerings out of devotion, faith and trust in the learning, purity and accomplishments of these Sangha members. If any member was not qualified, accepting such offerings would be a deception and a source of bad karma for both that person and the Sangha as a whole.

When Chudapanthaka was asked to leave the Sangha he was saddened and depressed and began to cry. The Buddha walked past, saw him crying and asked his followers what had happened. When the Buddha was told of Chudapanthaka's predicament, he took pity on him and asked him to remain in the Sangha and perform the role of cleaning the monks sandals. Chudapanthaka cleaned their sandals for many years with a focused mind. He was happy because he was still able to live as a Sangha member.

After many years of cleaning with one-focus, one-concentration and one-dedication, a thought suddenly came into Chudapanthaka's mind, "Is this dust the dust of earth or the dust of desire?" Then he immediately had this realization:

This is the dust of desire, and any learned one who fully abandons that dust is truly heedful of the Tathagata's teaching.

This is the dust of anger, and any learned one who fully abandons that dust is truly heedful of the Tathagata's teaching.

This is the dust of ignorance, and any learned one who fully abandons that dust is truly heedful of the Tathagata's teaching.

When those lines came into his mind, he instantly became an Arhat. He did nothing but clean the sandals of the monks and nuns with one-pointed mind repeating the phrase, "I'm cleaning the dust, I'm cleaning the dust," but this was enough for him to attain liberation, when he saw through his actions to the true nature of existence.

In the same way, Dodrupchen says, the purpose of cleaning a temple is to clean the mind. If we can purify our mind, the whole universe will become pure, because whatever negative emotions, attitudes, objects, enemies, or dirt there is outside ourselves will be transformed when our minds become pure. Our mind will become pure when we realize the true nature of the mind. That will happen only by working hard on external situations such as cleaning a temple.

### **Three Factors for Achieving a Pure Mind**

Dodrupchen explains that we can realize this pure mind through cleaning meditation by depending upon three factors. The first factor is the 'field,' which refers to material objects such as statues, images of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha or the temple itself. The second factor is our mental attitude or intention, and the third is the actual application of the cleaning.

### *The field*

You should remember what a Buddha actually represents while you perform cleaning meditation. You might regard the environment as the temple of the Buddha, or the temple of Guru Rinpoche or whoever, but you need to ask yourself what a Buddha really is in essence. A Buddha is not just a statue. A statue is a representation of a Buddha but a Buddha also represents something far greater than a particular human being. A Buddha may be one entity by nature, but in manifestation a Buddha is infinite. A Buddha symbolizes our universal nature, or quality, or truth. If we understand that, all the virtues, merits and qualities of the universe can become buddha-qualities. You should think of cleaning a temple as a service to the infinite number of Buddhas in the forms of different people, animals, and aspects of the natural world. If you can do that, everything can become a manifestation of peaceful, joyful and enlightened qualities. Cleaning the temple as a service to these infinite buddha-qualities rather than just one Buddha, or one master, will cause the benefits of your actions to multiply accordingly.

### *Intention*

Intention has two aspects, as Dodrupchen makes clear in this quotation from the *Abhidharmakosha*, “The intention has two aspects: the first aspect functions as the cause and the second aspect functions as the action itself.” Having the aspiration to clean the temple is the cause, while maintaining that aspiration during the actual performance of the cleaning is the action. You need to have both to complete the cleaning. In the beginning, you need the proper intention and inspiration to initiate the task of cleaning the temple. That is the cause of your actions. When you are actually

performing cleaning, you must keep that inspiration alive, again and again, so that your intention is maintained through the whole process.

### *The application of cleaning*

Dodrupchen advises us to clean with tolerance and diligence. The whole task of cleaning may seem too difficult; the amount of dirt you encounter may seem to constitute too great a hardship, but you should face all of these difficulties with tolerance and enthusiasm. Diligence in Buddhism means exerting oneself in any wholesome field with joyful enthusiasm. Shantideva says,<sup>2</sup> "Diligence is joy in what is wholesome." If you try to force yourself to clean without joy, your actions may become a source of depression, sadness, anger and frustration. True diligence has to have the joy and inspiration that comes from pushing yourself more all the time. So there are two aspects to the application of cleaning: tolerance toward whatever hardships you may encounter, and the diligence that comes from powerful joy.

If we have all three factors of the field, the intention and the application, our cleaning meditation will become a complete exercise.

### **Buddha's Discourse on the Five Merits of Cleaning**

During the Buddha's time there were six major cities in India. He lived mostly in and around two of these cities: namely Rajagriha (Kingsbury) and Shravasti. A proverb from the Buddha's time indicates the size of these cities: 'Every day one hundred babies are born and every day one hundred people die.' During the early part of his teaching career, the Buddha lived mainly around Rajagriha. One day a very rich business man called

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<sup>2</sup> Byang ch'ub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa, folio 66b//4 (Pub. Dodrupchen Gonpa)

Anathapindika (the Feeder of the Poor) came from Shravasti, felt an amazing faith and devotion in the Buddha, and invited him to Shravasti. The Buddha accepted his invitation and sent Shariputra, one of his main disciples, to Shravasti to find a location for the Buddha and his Sangha to live. According to the scriptures, he had about 1,300 disciples at that time, so they needed a large enough environment to accommodate them all. It seems that the Buddha and his disciples never really had structured buildings or dwellings when they stayed in Rajagriha, but lived mainly under trees in forests, woods and gardens.

Shariputra looked around Shravasti and selected a location as the most suitable for the Buddha and his followers. That area was a park belonged to Prince Jeta, the crown prince of the kingdom. So Anathapindika approached the prince and asked him to sell the land. The prince dismissed his request with the words, "Even if you were to cover the whole area with gold, I would not sell it to you." Anathapindika replied, "You have given me the price and I will pay it. I will cover the entire land with gold." When the prince eventually agreed, Anathapindika brought many horse carriages filled with gold coins and managed to cover the whole park, except for one tiny plot. So he ordered his men to find more gold to cover that spot, too. The prince was so amazed at Anathapindika's generosity and devotion that he said, "I do not need more gold. I will make an offering of that piece of land to the Buddha." Anathapindika built a hermitage complex for the Buddha and his followers, which became known as "the Hermitage of Anathapindika in the Garden of Jeta,"

The Buddha stayed at Jetavana for twenty-four summers. His visits are measured in summers because it was customary for monks and nuns to only stay in one place during the three-month rains season of the Indian summer,

due to the danger of floods and snakes during that time. For the remainder of the year, they were wanderers who lived a homeless life without attachment to places or possessions. It was Anathapindika's generosity and devotion that provided the principle complex of hermitages for the Buddha and his disciples at Shravasti.

Anathapindika was not just rich and devout, he was so totally devoted to the Buddha and his community that he gave everything he had to them over the years and served them constantly. Later in life, when he had nothing left to give, the Buddha made a rule for his Sangha members forbidding them to ask anything more from Anathapindika, saying, "He has nothing left to give and will feel terrible if he cannot give you what you ask for." When Anathapindika was dying, he was visited by Shariputra and although he had only three pieces of fruit in his possession, he gave those to Shariputra without hesitation. Shariputra said, "The merits that you have accumulated throughout your life from giving to the Buddha, his Sangha and the poor people in the country has less value than the merit you just accrued by giving me this fruit, because you have just given me everything you own."

It was Anathapindika that cleaned the Jetavana every morning. One morning he could not do so for some reason and the Buddha himself started to clean up the filth that was lying around. His Sangha members began to follow suit and so it came to pass that they cleaned the hermitage themselves. You may wonder why the Sangha did not regularly clean the Jetavana, given they have no families or children and should have had plenty of time to do so. This might be a strange concept for the Western mind to digest, but lay devotees in Buddhist cultures take care of the cleaning and the provision of food for the monks and nuns, because they consider it a privilege. They provide this service to enable the Sangha to concentrate on

their meditations, prayers and studies. It may seem unfair to the Western mind that the laity do the hard work while the ordained members enjoy the fruits of their labor. According to the ethical principles of Buddhism however, the monks and nuns are doing the laity a favor by giving them the opportunity to make these offerings, because the laity generate merit for themselves through doing so. They may be personally unable to dedicate their lives to the contemplative life of a Buddhist renunciate, but they can still generate merit by cleaning the hermitage. This particular day however, the Buddha and his followers did the cleaning. Buddha then gave a teaching called, ‘The five merits of cleaning.’

*Cleaning creates a clear mind for yourself*

First he said it is important to understand that if we are motivated to clean the environment out of attachment and craving, it will never be an expression of true cleanliness. If we clean from the right motivation, on the other hand, we will not just achieve a clean environment, we will also attain mental and emotional lucidity, which is the true practice of cleaning meditation.

*Cleaning brings about a clear mind in others*

The second merit is that anyone who comes to the temple will feel some kind of clarity in their own mind, instead of the usual clutter and confusion, because they will feel attuned to the neatness and beauty of the environment.

*Cleaning attracts celestial beings*

While the first two merits are easy to understand, the third is somewhat different. It concerns the celestial divinities of the god-realm. Buddhism acknowledges six possible realms of existence – the hell, hungry

ghost, human, animal, jealous gods and god realms – the latter of which includes miraculous beings of power and blessing. The Buddha said that despite our not be able to see these beings, they are able to visit us. If the environment is dirty however, they will never grace us with their presence. Only negative energies, spirits, and demonic forces will come and enjoy our dwellings. Negative attracts negative. It is very important to understand that we are not talking about enlightened Buddhas here, just beings of higher qualities than ourselves.

#### *Cleaning causes beauty*

The fourth merit that the Buddha taught is that if you clean the temple or hermitage or whatever, it will create the type of karma that causes beauty. If you would like to become beautiful or handsome, you should clean the temples and shrine rooms.

#### *Cleaning causes rebirth in the god realms*

The fifth and final merit that cleaning causes is a higher form of rebirth. We require more than this kind of merit to become a Buddha or take rebirth in a Pure Land; we require wisdom for that. Ordinary cleaning however, will lead to a level of virtue that is the cause of a rebirth in the heavenly realms of the gods.

### **Five Benefits of Cleaning**

Dodrupchen Rinpoche includes another five categories that further illustrate the benefits of cleaning a temple as a meditative practice.

#### *The benefits of cleaning in this life and the next*

The benefits that cleaning meditation will bring about in this life are happiness, wealth, and health. Dodrupchen provides the example of the Arhat Midugpa (Unattractive) in order to illustrate this point. Midugpa was

initially a novice monk who came to stay at Jetavana. He was quite ugly however, and whenever he went out on his alms-round, he was offered very little food by the lay devotees. Some kind of discrimination must have been taking place. Midugpa started cleaning the hermitage at Jetavana, and after a while he found that whenever he cleaned he received good alms offerings. One day another monk wanted to clean the area that Midugpa cleaned and Midugpa pleaded with him to desist, because he relied upon that area to ensure he received food. The other monks were confused by this response until Midugpa explained the unusual relationship between his cleaning activities and his alms-round. This focus on cleaning did not just ensure that Midugpa had food to eat, it also contributed to his eventual attainment of Arhathood. The point of this story being that cleaning a temple will also bring about happiness, wealth and health.

Dodrupchen then says that the benefits of temple cleaning for the next life are that it will bring about the kind of rebirth where we experience enjoyment and happiness.

The ultimate benefit of cleaning the temple in this life is that it clears the clouded mind. Dodrupchen quotes another story to illustrate this point, this time of a woman named Saga who had five sons. One day all of Saga's five sons were killed in an accident. The Buddha instructed his followers not to tell Saga of the fate of her sons. He gave her Dharma teachings instead, and she meditated upon them and became an Arhat. Only then did the Buddha tell her that her sons were dead. As she had now attained Arhathood, this news did not cause her to suffer as it otherwise would have. If she had learned the news before she attained liberation, she would never have been able to realize Arhathood, because her mind would have been too preoccupied with sadness and suffering. Just as Saga did before us, if we can

clear our cluttered mind, we will be able to realize the truth. Cleaning helps us to free the mind from obscurations.

### *The benefits of cleaning according to Mahayana Buddhism*

According to Mahayana Buddhism, we should approach cleaning a temple with the motivation of bodhichitta. In this approach, you do not clean to create a clear mind for yourself or the community of practitioners, or mahasiddhas, or whatever, you clean to cultivate merit so that you may benefit all sentient beings. You should also apply the Mahayana principles of the six perfections in your cleaning meditation. The first five of these perfections are called ‘skilful means’ and the sixth is called ‘wisdom.’ Sometimes these qualities are divided into six perfections and sometimes they are only divided into the two aspects - skilful means (Skt., *upaya* in Sanskrit, Tib., *thabs*) and wisdom (Skt., *prajna*, Tib., *shes rab*). Skilful means are more like devises. They are not necessarily absolute truth, but without them we cannot get to the truth. The truth that we are trying to get to is wisdom. In the Mahayana, wisdom and skilful means are said to be like the two wings of a bird. We need both in order to realize Buddhahood, just as a bird needs two wings to fly. The six perfections are generosity, discipline, tolerance, diligent, contemplation, and wisdom.

### *Generosity*

Giving your time and energy with total inspiration when you clean is the principle of generosity. This means you do not resent what you are doing, thinking, “I don’t want to do this. Why am I wasting my time when I could be doing something better?” Instead of responding like that, you cultivate a feeling of great joy as you freely give your time and energy to the temple cleaning.

### *Discipline*

The discipline of cleaning is that you do not just partially clean the temple, leaving half of it dirty, missing corners, pushing the dirt under the rug or passing over some areas in an incomplete manner. You concentrate on the whole area with total evenness and attention.

### *Tolerance*

You may feel that the task of cleaning is too difficult for you, that it is too cold, too boring, you are hungry and tired, or have already had a demanding day. You might have to face all kinds of hardship, but if you can clean with joy in your heart, you will develop tolerance, and be able to minimize all of these difficulties.

### *Diligent*

If you clean the temple with total diligence, dedication, and joy, you will be able to engage in the whole practice properly. On the other hand, holding some kind of mental grudge, even you finish the cleaning, it is not a work of meditation. Cleaning with total "joy" is the practice of true diligence.

### *Contemplation*

In this context, contemplation is not simply the act of settling the mind through one-pointed concentration; it implies that you are focusing wholeheartedly on whatever it is that you are doing. You do not clean with only a part of your mind attending to what you are doing, and another part involved in something else. Your mind must be wholly alert and present with your activities, dedicating your total mind and total body to whatever you are doing. Only then does your cleaning become an activity of contemplation or tranquility.

### *Wisdom*

The Buddhist notion of wisdom has many aspects. It can simply refer to knowledge and learning, or it can refer to realizing the truth. Wisdom may come from learning and analyzing, or it may come from the contemplative wisdom of meditation. It may also arise as a result of the merits and awareness that you develop in your activities.

If we clean the temple with bodhichitta and the six perfections, the result will be Buddhahood. We do not require anything else as a meditation, as a practice, or as a social service; we can just clean and clean in this way. As I said earlier, a temple does not necessarily have to be the building in which we practice; anywhere that you live can be a temple for you. Even your own body is a temple, so maintaining your body and keeping it clean, peaceful and free from clutter is the same as cleaning an actual temple.

#### *The benefits of cleaning according to Common Buddhism*

Dodrupchen again quotes another story from the sutras to illustrate how cleaning works as a spiritual practice from the Common Buddhist (Hinayana) perspective. Here, cleaning is used as a means for training the unruly mind and developing the kind of realizations that are characteristic of Arhathood.

The King of a neighboring province sent two skilled workers to King Prasenajit, the ruler of Shravasti. These two men were extremely skilled, but very wild and full of wrong views. After a while people began to question why the King allowed these reckless people to stay with him. The King was at a loss and sent them to Anathapindika, the wealthy benefactor of the Buddha. Anathapindika put them to work cleaning the Jetavana, because he thought it might improve their minds. These two men duly cleaned the hermitage, but found that instead completing the cleaning task, the

hermitage continually filled with dirt and rubbish again and again. They cleaned for the whole day, but could not get the area keep clean. When night fell, they went to sleep in a corner of the hermitage.

In the middle of the night however, they were awakened by all these amazing visions filling the hermitage. The Buddhist scriptures talk about celestial beings that would visit the Buddha in the night to receive teachings from him, filling the whole hermitage with light and sound and music. The two unruly men witnessed the transformation of the hermitage as a result of their nocturnal visitations on that night. They were so overwhelmed by this experience they asked the Sangha members to ordain them the following day. They meditated diligently and soon became Arhats. Arhats develop the ability to perform miracles, such as flying, manifesting great lights, knowledge of other people's minds, et cetera. The two men returned to the King's palace with miraculous demonstrations of great accomplishment, favorably impressing him about the efficacy of the Dharma. In other words, if you practice meditation in this way, you may not become a Buddha soon, but you will achieve a high level of spiritual accomplishment.

*The benefits of cleaning with the correct motivation*

Dodrupchen goes on to discuss the decline in people's appreciation of true spirituality, remarking on the tendency of his contemporaries to judge people or places by whether they are beautiful or impressive or ugly or whatever, rather than by their spiritual accomplishments. He says that we judge things by the look of the field – the outward appearance of things. We also judge things by how much they cost, thinking that a particular temple is wonderful, for instance, because it cost millions of dollars. We no longer value it for its qualities of peacefulness, joyfulness and calmness, but

because of its size, how much gold and silver it contains, how many statues it holds, how many programs it operates, et cetera.

This kind of superficiality misses the real point of spirituality. In the same way, people that tend to seek worldly benefits from their activities miss the point of spiritual practice. When we think, “If I clean the temple I will be healthy,” or “If I clean the temple my business will become more profitable,” we fail to take the opportunity to gain any real spiritual benefit from our practice. As I have reiterated throughout this talk, the whole purpose of cleaning the temple is to have a "clear mind." If we have a clear mind ourselves, we will become the source of a clear mind for others, and will slowly be able to realize Buddhahood. If, on the other hand, we are only focusing on worldly benefits, this form of realization will elude us completely. Dodrupchen advises us to immediately learn to respect and serve the field – or temple – with the correct motivation.

#### *The benefits of cleaning as a service to the Buddhas*

Dodrupchen also compares the merits of serving the actual historical Buddha to the merits of serving a representation of the Buddha, such as a statue. He explains there is no real difference between the two, because as we mentioned earlier, a Buddha represents the ultimate peace, joy, and tranquility of the whole universe. Buddha was not just a historical person in India or Tibet; Buddha or Buddhahood is the universal truth. That being so, all the positive qualities of the universe is a buddha-manifestation or buddha-appearance. The virtues, qualities, and countless manifestations of a Buddha are therefore infinite. He quotes from a sutra where Shakyamuni Buddha says, “Making offerings by cleaning a temple that contains monuments will have the same merits as making offerings and cleaning the

dwelling of the Buddha himself.” The virtues of a Buddha are infinite, so the merits of serving a Buddha would be infinite also. Making offerings to the Buddha, or cleaning the temple of the Buddha, would also be an activity of infinite potential. If we understand and appreciate that fact, our activities will be a source of great benefit. On the other hand, if we do not use and appreciate the spiritual element of our cleaning meditation, there may be little or no benefit from what we do. That is why it is very important to understand and appreciate this view.

### **How to Clean a Temple**

We have been talking about the virtue, merit and benefit of cleaning a temple as an example for turning every aspect of our lives into a meditative and spiritual exercise. Now we turn our attention to what Dodrupchen has to say about how we should go about this cleaning exercise. He says the important thing to realize is that this is a special kind of cleaning, not just ordinary cleaning. We have to make that distinction and clean with a clear mind and full awareness of the merits that will arise from this activity.

Although we have said that cleaning a temple will help us to create a "clear mind," we actually also need to begin our cleaning *with* a "clear mind." Dodrupchen advises us to approach this activity with a minimal amount of clutter, confusion, conceptualization, and emotional conflicts in our minds, by concentrating one-pointedly on our actions. We should think, “How wonderful that I am able to clean this temple with a totally awakened, pure mind.” When engaged in cleaning, we should continually remember the merits of serving the field in this way, and remind ourselves that these merits will benefit all sentient beings by giving them a "clear mind." It will also

bring about Buddhahood for ourselves by enabling us to master the six perfections.

Here, Dodrupchen gives a number of examples to illustrate that there are always exceptions to prescribed behaviors and that the pursuit of liberation should not be viewed as a prescriptive approach. In each case, it is the intention behind the action that is important. He discusses how people behave within different cultures and how correct behavior is often a matter of convention rather than law. In most places in Tibet for instance, when an important person pays a visit everybody stands up as a mark of respect. However, there are some places such as Gyalmorong, where people sit down in deference to an important visitor. He says it is also important to understand that different intentions produce different effects.

Dodrupchen then quotes from *Chatuhshataka* by Aryadeva. where the story is told of a man who made a little clay miniature stupa (Tib., *tsa tsa*) with devotion, and placed it outside in an area beside a road. A second person came along and saw this miniature stupa, thinking, “When the rain comes it will be destroyed.” He saw an old shoe nearby and covered the stupa to protect it from the weather. Later a third person came along and thought, “Someone put a dirty shoe on this miniature stupa!” He took the shoe and threw it away. While these three people performed totally different activities, they all had pure intentions, and as a result they all created the merit to take birth in a heavenly realm.

He also tells the story of an Indian woman called Kachali, who gave rise to an extraordinary faith and devotion when she saw the Buddha traveling one day. She felt that Buddha had been her child in a previous lifetime and spontaneously went up to the Buddha and hugged him. In oriental culture, especially the India of those days, that is an unthinkable

expression of affection. However, instead of creating any kind of bad karma, she instantly became an Arhat and realized the highest attainment.

In other words, even if you do something that is outside the norm of your given culture, if you do it from the right intention, it will create benefits. Dodrupchen points out that while there are those kinds of exceptions, cleaning is a universally meritorious activity and not in itself an exceptional thing at all.

### **The Four Aspects of Cleaning Practice**

I will conclude with Dodrupchen's presentation of the four different aspects that are involved in the performance of cleaning practice. While some of this has come from Indian culture and may not apply to us, it is still worth including it here. The four aspects are the special field, the practice of cleaning, the view, and dedication.

#### *The special field*

The special field has three components of its own: the environment, the intention behind cleaning that environment, and the engendering of faith.

The environment can include a temple or hermitage or any other place of spiritual significance. Even though your own house may not be a so-called 'temple,' you may have a shrine room or the corner of a room where you have placed some kind of Buddha image or do your meditation practice. That place is also counted as a special sanctuary. You can recite prayers and invite the buddhas to consecrate there, so that it becomes a temple. The special field can therefore be either a real temple or an imagined one where buddha-qualities are present.

The intention behind cleaning that environment must also have three qualities: the field as a refuge, ourselves as devotees, and the cleaning as a

service. The first quality involves seeing the field – for instance a statue of the Buddha or Guru Rinpoche – as living Buddhas rather than objects fashioned from metal. These Buddhas are to be understood as alive with wisdom, compassion and omniscient mind. You should regard them as your refuge, the object of your prayers, and a source of blessings. That is one quality of intention. The second quality is to regard yourself as a devotee of the Buddha and Buddha images. You should never think that the Buddha is your friend or equal and that you are fit to be the judge of whether the Buddha has good qualities or not. The third quality of intention is that cleaning is a service, and as such, qualifies as a privilege or exercise in devotion. You should not regard this form of offering as a chore, or burden, or obligation.

The third component of the special field involves three levels of trust or faith. When you see religious objects, places of reverence or pilgrimage, or when you think about the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, or meditation practice, there are three degrees of faith you can engender. The first degree of faith is partiality, “Oh, I like this, I enjoy this.” The second degree of faith is yearning, “Oh, I want this.” The third degree of faith is total trust. Here, there is no question of liking or not liking, of wanting or not wanting; you have total trust or total faith in the objects of the Buddhadharma. The important thing is to have *some* kind of faith in those religious objects. If we can have that faith and perform the cleaning with the above qualities of intention – seeing the statues as living Buddhas, ourselves as devotees and cleaning as a devotional exercise – a great transformation will take place in our minds and hearts. Dodrupchen says that this kind of transformation will continue to take place, even in our dreams and the *bardo* experience. We will see the objects of refuge, ourselves as having devotion, and our minds

being purified by devotional exercises, so that the benefits of cleaning will translate into changes in our lives, our dreams and our post-mortem experiences.

### *The practice of cleaning*

Dodrupchen states that we have to perform the cleaning with a great excitement of joy. It is not just a case of, “I have to clean. Its okay, its nice.” We have to think, “How wonderful! This is a great privilege!” We should go about cleaning with intense diligence and a great joyous excitement in this manner.

The instructions for cleaning here are what may not be so relevant to Western culture, and we do not need to take them too literally. Dodrupchen says that we must first sprinkle water over the ground. In India or Tibet, the grounds are mostly made of mud and dirt and therefore naturally become very dusty. If you were to use a broom immediately, you would permeate the atmosphere with dust and everything would become filthy. That is why water is first used to settle the dust. When the dust has been dampened in this way, we can gently sweep the grounds with a soft broom. Finally, we spray scented water or perfume to purify the air. These actions will transform the temple or hermitage into a place that inspires clear mind in both ourselves and others. We could perhaps exchange a vacuum for a broom in the modern world, but you can see the principle of the cleaning here.

### *The view*

Dodrupchen then discusses a further level of cleaning, which he refers to as the view. He says that while we are cleaning we should view ourselves as if we were acting in a dream. We should approach cleaning as if

everything were unreal and think along these lines, “Oh me, so-called ‘Tulku Thondup,’ is just a designation, just a name, just a dream. There is nothing solid, nothing real.” Usually we think more along the following lines, “Oh, me, I am Tulku Thondup, I am like this and like that.” Then the ego becomes bigger and bigger, tougher and tougher, more solid and more sensitive to itself. If you see yourself as a person in a dream, on the other hand, you might feel that you are there, but in a softer kind of way. You might even feel like some sort of atmosphere rather than a solid entity. You would then become more peaceful and have less intensity about your experiences.

Next, he says, we should view the world as a *Gandarva* city. That is another very foreign term from Indian culture. *Gandarva* means ‘smell-eater.’ The idea here is that there is another world system that we cannot see, but which exists parallel to our own universe. It is not the human world or the animal world, but nonetheless it is a world system in its own right. If you had a psychic eye, you might see it sometime, because a Gandarva city forms and dissolves, forms and dissolves. Some people have seen whole cities form and then dissolve and disappear in their cup. That kind of thing happens, according to Indian culture, and we call it the ‘smell-eater’ city. We should view the world just like one of these Gandarva cities, where there is no solidity, no durability, no longevity. It just forms and dissolves, forms and dissolves, like an illusion.

Dodrupchen then advises us to regard the cleaning process as the movements of a mirage. It is not solid, sturdy or rigid; it is simply a mirage that you can see, but cannot catch or hold. You should also view the field – the Buddha images and such – as illusions. You can see them vividly, but there are no tangible, solid, gross forms.

These are all techniques to teach us the view; to teach us how to understand ourselves and the phenomenal world. While we need to employ the mental qualities of the six perfections when we are cleaning, they should not make our mind or emotions stronger, more solid, rigid, and limited. The purpose of the view is to make our mind and emotions gentler, softer, and more open. We will still be aware of our thoughts and emotions, but will not feel such a great temptation to grasp them or allow them to become the source of further conflicts. The world will become a place where it is possible for anything to appear, while at the same time having the characteristic and quality of openness without any restrictions, limitations or conflicts.

Dodrupchen introduces yet another technique at this point, which is somewhat separate from the insubstantial nature of existence that he has been discussing so far. Nonetheless, the following technique encapsulates this view and provides a skilful means for utilizing it to accumulate merit. He says that we do not have to think of ourselves as just one body with two hands when we are cleaning the temple; we can visualize ourselves as having an ocean of bodies. Each body has an infinite number hands, each hand radiates an infinite number of rays of light, each ray of light holds a broom, and each broom serves an infinite number of Buddha Pure Lands. He is not saying, “Become crazy and live in a world of impossibilities.” This is a method for bringing boundless, infinite qualities into your world.

That is what I tried to explain in my book *Boundless Healing*, when discussing the teachings of the *Avatamsaka-sutra*. If we could imagine infinite qualities and expressions, that would have an amazing power to release the tensions and stresses we have accumulated. Those stresses and tensions are the source of all our mental and emotional difficulties in daily

life. This technique then, encourages us to open up to a boundless nature with infinite qualities and expressions.

### *Dedication*

The conclusion of this cleaning meditation is the dedication of merit. Whatever merit you have accumulated should be dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings. Here, Dodrupchen advises us to also make the following aspiration, “May I clean all the Pure Lands of all the Buddhas of the ten directions, so that the suffering and the cause of suffering of all sentient beings may be swept away by the broom of enlightened intention.” You should dedicate the merit in that way, and make the aspiration that this will be the cause for removing the impurities of all sentient beings.

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*Question:* I am too busy to do my own cleaning and employ someone to do it for me. Why is cleaning such an important part of spiritual practice and am I creating demerit by allowing someone else to do it?

*Tulku Thondup:* Cleaning a temple is just example for using daily activities as a form of meditation. We could turn many aspects of our lives into spiritual practice in this way. Cleaning a temple is an important meditation exercise, but we are really discussing it as an example for other meditations. There are many ways to clean a temple, even as a meditation exercise, there are an infinite number of doors that we could open in this regard. We could visualize a pure land that is totally unadulterated and clean. If we can visualize a world that is uncontaminated by any pollutants or corruption, we will have achieved the same aim.

One aspect of *ngondro* practice, for example, is mandala offering. In this practice we offer the whole universe to the Buddhas; but we do not offer a world full of filth, dirt, negative emotions and struggles, even if that is an accurate description of our world. We create a world that is a beautiful, clean, prosperous, peaceful, and joyful – and offer it to the Buddhas. The Buddhas do not rely on such offerings of course, it is simply an exercise in developing our own generosity and openness.

If you employ someone else to do your cleaning however, you can still think, “Cleaning has amazing merits and I’m giving that person the opportunity to accumulate those merits.” Even if that person may not appreciate the opportunity as such, from your point of view, you are giving them the opportunity to use their time as a kind of meditation exercise, even if they do not have the right intentions or view. There is a Buddhist story about a pig that was being chased by another animal, and in trying to escape, made three circumambulations of a stupa. Even though it had no intention of paying its respects, something registered about the protective presence of the stupa in the pig’s mind, because according to the scriptures, it took a rebirth in a happier realm as a result of this action. In the same way, even if the person you employ does not appreciate what he or she is supposed to do, your feeling that you are giving them that opportunity might have beneficial results.

The important thing in whatever we are doing – whether it is cleaning, cooking, gardening, walking, or whatever – is that if we can generate a feeling of the presence of a Buddha as a source of blessings, and feel that we are receiving those blessings, that activity has become a process of meditation.

If the place where you do your meditation is a blessed place, nearly anyone who comes there will receive some benefit. Even if you do not clean it yourself, you should just appreciate and enjoy the cleanliness and dedicate or offer it to the Buddhas, other people, and celestial beings, enjoying the environment as a source of meditation without grasping. The important point is that if cleaning becomes a source of peace, calm and a heightened appreciation of your world, it is working as a spiritual training. On the other hand, if the clean environment and sparkling statues becomes a source of attachment, ego, and pride, you will be misusing them. It does not matter if the environment for our meditations is real or visualized, a temple or a home, cleaned by someone else or by ourselves, if you appreciate it and use it to open yourself up, the result will be a clear mind. Any situation that is peaceful and uncluttered and lends itself to creating a clear mind in yourself and others is very important at the beginning of your spiritual practice.

*Question:* Whenever I clean I feel a real aggression toward what I'm doing and just want to get it out of the way as quickly as possible. I can appreciate getting everything cleaned up, but it is still very aggravating to have to do it. I have read Buddhist books that say discriminating between good and bad and wanting to get rid of the bad is not conducive to spiritual development, and that it is better to transform unpleasant things into their opposite. That seems to be a contradiction to what you are saying here. How do you go about appreciating cleanness without discrimination?

*Tulku Thondup:* There are two separate points here, which require two separate responses. The first is that we should clean with diligence and joy, as Dodrupchen Rinpoche says. We should celebrate our good fortune instead of growing resentful, angry and upset at the time our cleaning may be taking.

That is the very attitude we are trying to change through this practice. If you are cleaning with aggression, you are definitely not going about it in the correct way. As Shantideva says, “If you are meditating on generosity and someone knocks on your door and asks you for food, you cannot tell that person, “You are disturbing my training!” ” Their visiting should be regarded as a golden opportunity to practice the generosity that you were cultivating in your training. In the same way, when you see dirt you should think, “How wonderful, now I have the opportunity to clean it,” instead of “Oh, this dirt is back again.” If you feel aggression when you clean, that is not good, and you should try to change that into a positive attitude by sending yourself the right message, “I don’t want the aggression aspect, I want the inspiration instead.” If you keep sending that message to yourself, it will gradually change your attitude.

The other point is that we cannot mix two Buddhist approaches. The cleaning meditation that we are discussing belongs to the sutric, or exoteric level of Buddhist teachings. Teachings on nondiscrimination, where one lives in cemeteries and enjoys filth as nectar, are part of the tantric or esoteric level of Buddhism. We have to keep those two approaches separate. It is not possible for them to become one training, for that would only lead to all kinds of confusion. Unless we are highly accomplished meditators, we cannot do high tantric practices where filth can be enjoyed and anger transformed into the energy of wisdom. We cannot approach our minds or emotions in this way at the level of sutric meditation. At the sutric level, we have to discriminate between pure and impure, good and bad, sacred and profane. We need to concentrate upon doing good and wholesome actions in order grow spiritually.

At the tantric level, we should not have discrimination. We are counseled to view everything that is conventionally regarded as good or bad as either designations of the mind or distinctions based upon cultural habits. We are encouraged to go beyond those designations.

Another important point to consider is that while we should try our best to adopt this kind of elevated view if we have received tantric initiations, we are still very much at an ordinary level of spiritual accomplishment. We like some things and we dislike others. We have all kinds of discriminations, ninety-nine point nine percent of our lives. When our discriminations are very rigid and vivid in this way, we need to put the main emphasis of our practice on the sutric Buddhist approach. This text of Dodrupchen Rinpoche is very much focused on this sutric approach to meditation.

*Question:* In my experience it may be a great opportunity to clean a Buddhist temple when you are surrounded by people who can share and appreciate what you have done. But when you clean something and it just becomes dirty again the next day, you become exhausted by it after a while. How do you maintain the energy to persevere with this practice?

*Tulku Thondup:* Dodrupchen says that when someone did an amazingly good deed in the Golden Ages when the Buddha was still alive, it was much less meritorious than a moderately good deed performed by someone in the Dark Ages. That is because we require much more effort and dedication to perform meritorious deeds in difficult times and situations. In the Golden Ages, good deeds were easy to perform, and may have been taken somewhat for granted. The lack of inspiration that exists in the Dark Ages means that we have to work so much harder. If you make an effort to clean the temple and find that nobody really appreciates it, your motivation for cleaning has

to have a different emphasis. If you can maintain even a fraction of the Dharma attitude in your cleaning, it will have more power and more merit than someone who cleaned with inspiration and enthusiasm in a golden situation. If you understand and really assimilate this fact, you begin to feel fortunate, an amazing amount of inspiration at having the opportunity to clean a temple in difficult situations.

If the task seems never-ending, you should remember to take on challenges that are manageable, because if we undertake challenges that we cannot handle we will end up in defeat. Then we might lose all inspiration and become tired and exhausted and never go back. If we take on challenges that we are certain we can fulfill, on the other hand, we will feel good about doing them and the inspiration that comes from that will lead to a greater purpose. Just like the story about the two unruly men who were tamed by cleaning the Jetavana hermitage, where the miracles they witnesses inspired them to become Arhats. That story is an illustration of the fact that even when something seems pointless, endless, or impossible, persevering with it can have amazing results.

*Question:* What about cleaning the habitats of other sentient beings, such as spiders and bugs? I live in a house where I cohabitate with other creatures in the shrine room and I have a real ambivalence about destroying their habitat and taking their lives. How does one go about dealing with this issue?

*Tulku Thondup:* That is a really difficult question to answer. According to Mahayana Buddhism, the whole of our lives should be dedicated to the service of others. We should not have even a trace of selfishness. While that is the principle of Mahayana Buddhism, who can really follows that kind of teaching? As ordinary people, we can only do our best. If we try to give a

little more room to others than we used to give, if we open a little more and try to be a little more gentle, we will slowly be able to grow up and one day will be able to practice the Mahayana teachings properly by dedicating our whole lives for the sake of others. However, if we cannot do that now, we have to teach ourselves little by little, which is what Buddhist meditation practices are designed to assist us with.

Sometimes we might misuse dharma trainings however. We may go on a meditation retreat and come back more rigid, narrow, and egoistic. That is not the fault of meditation itself, but the result of misusing our meditation practices. It is the same with religion, the same with concepts, and the same with social services. Sometimes we undertake a social service and begin to think that our way is the best or only way. This is effectively just holding onto another position and becomes another way of fighting people. Even though we may claim that we are taking the best, most spiritual or most religious approach, we misuse that approach most of the time. If we can give up a little bit every day and open up little bit every day, we will begin to make progress. Actually, it is better not to think of it in terms of a daily occurrence. If you check yourself after six months, you will begin see little differences. If we want to help others, that help will not come from somewhere other than ourselves. We will not be able to provide that help unless we open up our minds. In other words, the bottom line for becoming helpful to others is how much we open our minds – to what extent we can release or relax or loosen the tightness of our grasping minds.

Clearing spiders where they want to have their webs without injuring them is a wonderful aspiration if you can do it. However, there is a colloquial Tibetan expression that says, ‘Old compassion becomes anger.’ This refers to the fact that we often begin something with a compassionate

intention, “I have compassion for all sentient beings, ants and spiders and insects and rats and mice and snakes and everything else. So come and enjoy this, because it is for all of us.” You may really think that way today, but tomorrow your patience may start to wear thin and you will be saying, “Oh, I don’t know if this is really such a good idea.” By the following day you are thinking, “I think I have to put some boundaries around this.” Then, after some time, you are saying, “I have to call the exterminators.” Then, after that, everything is clean!

We have to be careful that our compassion is realistic or practicable. People often ask me what to do about things like ants or rats or mice. I don’t really know; I don’t have an answer. In my house we have rats, ants, and mice. What to do; I don’t really know. I don’t want to say, “You should kill them,” and I don’t want to say, “Don’t do anything,” because both approaches have their problems. I always say, “Try to do something to prevent them.” If there are no spiders, do not provide a situation where spiders will come and make a nest. That is the most balanced approach. If we can tolerate all these difficult situations, then of course, we should be completely non-violent at all times. There are many stories about bodhisattvas who gave their whole lives, their property, their wealth and became servants to others. If we have that kind of strength, we should do exactly what they did; but that approach is very difficult. We should do what we can, but we should not jump into something we cannot do. I’m not necessarily saying you should have spider webs in your room, but if you can do that, wonderful! That is what we are supposed to do as bodhisattvas really.

*Question:* There are other ethical dilemmas involved in this issue for me. For instance, I had to spray ants because they were living in this one-hundred-year-old tree, and if that tree collapsed as a result of being hollowed out by the ants it might kill someone. Sometimes you need to remove something because it has the potential to cause a lot of pain and problems. Also, the backyard of my current living situation is mostly all dirt. I would like to make it nice for myself and the birds and wildlife in the area. However, if I bring in more dirt and plants, I will kill the things that are already living there. I feel confused about what to do.

*Tulku Thondup:* The best way to approach these things is to let them take their natural course. If we cannot do that, we have to devise other strategies, but that is often difficult. Are trees more important or are ants more important? We do not really know the answer to that. Sometimes our judgments are right and sometimes they are not. It is very difficult to judge situations when we do not know the answer. If there is a way to let nature take its course, that would be the best approach. On the other hand, sometimes it might not be the best thing to do. You have to say that every case is different and hope for the best!

We often approach things with our own ideas and principles, thinking that it is the only way to do things. We hold onto our little idea and become more rigid and tight until we cannot see anything but our own narrow way. Even if you think it is a spiritual way of thinking and seeing, we may not be correct or we may not be using our ideas correctly. Just like a fly caught in a spider's web, the more it struggles the more it becomes entangled in the web until it finally suffocated and dies. In the same way, fixating on certain concepts will ensure that we remain deeply embedded in our own samsaric bondage. We have to be careful that we are not just thinking that something

is the best way; it really has to work effectively as a solution. We should be very careful about initiating new ideas and actions. When we do act, we should focus on that activity, and try to bring openness, peace, and joy into our minds and avoid becoming tight or rigid about our ideas. Then, whatever we do, we will be moving in the right direction, even if we are only doing so in small steps. If we try to approach whatever we do with the attitude of bodhichitta or through the practice of the six perfections, thinking, “I am doing this for the sake of all sentient beings,” we will always have a safeguard for our actions. Even if we cannot yet do that properly, we can at least approach things with a kinder, gentler, and more peaceful mental attitude. If we do everything with mindfulness, then whatever we do will be done in the right way. If we keep moving forward, little by little in this way, it will amount to an amazing degree of progress.

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This is a transcription of a talk given by Tulku Thondup at the Mahasiddha Nyingmapa Temple in Hawley, Western Massachusetts, on September 8, 2001. It was transcribed and edited by Dee Collings.