

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara
Dharma Post #4-B Dharanis (Reciting and Chanting Words/Phrases with Great Powers)

Dear Thay, dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

Dharanis

According to **The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism**,¹ *dharani* is translated from Sanskrit as “mnemonic device” or “code.” It is derived from the Sanskrit root translated as “to hold” or “to maintain.” This suggests a verbal formula believed to support and help retain or encapsulate the meaning of lengthier texts and teachings (thus serving as a mnemonic device). It is said that those who memorize and recite dharanis (which may or may not have semantic meaning) gain the power to retain the fuller teachings that the dharani ‘retain’.

Reciting dharanis, then, is an expedient device that can help us deepen our engagement with the Dharma—the way of understanding and love. The *Bodhisattvabhumi*² describes four types of dharanis, which can be seen as different aspects of practice. The four types are those associated with:

1. the teachings (*Dharma*)
2. the real (true), rather than literal, meaning of words (*artha*)
3. spells, charms or magic syllables that may or may not have semantic meaning—also known as mind protectors (*mantra*)
4. acquiescence, patience, steadfastness, endurance (*ksanti*)³

The **first two types of dharani** help us learn and remember the teachings. These two types are brought about by remembering or recollecting (mindfulness/ *smirti*) the teaching, and benefitting from the insight (*prajna*) we gain from this practice. Thus we are able to retain a teaching’s words and meanings through our own experience.

In the chapter on Merit, the *Lotus Sutra* describes how countless bodhisattvas are able to realize the fruits of their practice through the dharani called “keeping what has been heard.” According to Thay, this is the bodhisattva’s capacity to uphold and preserve the teachings, and share with others the truths that they have been able to hear and understand. These bodhisattvas have attained “the ability to speak with unobstructed eloquence” which allows them to share in such a way that others can understand, and guide others to the truth.

This type of dharani can even be a letter of the alphabet associated with a meaningful term. For example, the letter “A” in the *Prajnaparamita* literature serves as a code for “*ady-anutpannatva*,” which means, “unproduced from the very beginning.”⁴ This type of dharani can be seen as a powerful “seal” of the teachings impressed upon the mind. Over the centuries, Chinese Buddhists created dharani or

sutra pillars, engraved with dharani-sutras or simple dharani incantations, which were usually erected outside Buddhist temples. On most dharani pillars, the dharani or dharani-sutras are written in Chinese characters, phonetically transcribing the original Sanskrit text. In this way many people were able to view, practice and retain sacred texts and sutras. These pillars became popular during the Tang dynasty (618–907), and many are still standing to this day.

While dwelling in concentration (*samadhi*), we are able to receive and retain the **third type of dharani**. These mantras help practitioners overcome adversity and counteract harmful influences in their practice, and the dharani bestows protection (*paritta*). The Buddha offered many paritta dharanis to his students to calm and protect them when they were worried or afraid.

In **Peaceful Action, Open Heart**, Thay described dharanis as words or phrases that hold great powers of insight and transformation. “Just by reciting a dharani mindfully (often repeated three times) we invoke the power of the syllables, the sacred sounds that are produced when body, speech and mind are in harmony, unified, in a state of samadhi. With the energy of concentration, the sound of a dharani can, in and of itself, bring about transformation.”

Many schools of Buddhism chant dharanis and dharani-sutras they consider important to their practice. Zen schools chant a basket of dharanis and dharani-sutras as part of formal practice.⁵ *Om mani padme hum*, “homage to the Jewel-Lotus One,” Avalokiteshvara (also known as Manipadma—“Jewel-Lotus One”) is one of the most well-known of all Buddhist mantras referred to as the “six-syllable spell,” said to invoke the protection of Avalokiteshvara. In our Plum Village tradition, we chant the dharani “Namo ‘valokiteshvara” in English, “*Namo Bo Tat Quan The Am* in Vietnamese, and in many other languages.

The **fourth type of dharani** is said to help bodhisattvas in acquiescing to the true nature of dharma, and gives them the courage to remain in the world of samsara for the sake of all beings. Here a bodhisattva looks deeply into a mantra (reciting it in unison with the in and out breath) until they understand it’s meaning—that is, that it is without meaning. Ksanti in this sense is the tolerance to hold the paradoxical state of mind, where all dharma (objects of mind) are inherently empty, while maintaining mindful awareness of the present moment.

Embodying dharanis: When practicing with dharanis, I have found that the most effective dharanis for me are those that naturally synchronize with my breath and my heart beat. As I practice throughout the day—while sitting walking, or lying down, the repetition of the dharani and its natural rhythm becomes embedded in my body. This practice also helps me to focus my mind. At work, when I take walking breaks, reciting a dharani as I walk keeps me in touch with my steps and helps reduce the pressure of a mind that wants to process, process, process. In this way it is a refreshing practice for me.

The Spiritual Energy of Dharanis

In the chapter on *Dharani* in the *Lotus Sutra*, bodhisattvas, kings, and daughters of *rakshasas*,⁶ along with other women, proclaim and offer supernatural dharani-charms for the purpose of protecting those who accept and keep, read and recite, and put into practice the *Scripture of the Dharma Blossom*, “thus enabling them to gain tranquility and to separate themselves from decline and care, to dry up the multitude of noxious medicines.”⁷ These dharanis of protection are meant to encourage the bodhisattva’s power of steady concentration (*samadhi*) when facing those who cannot accept the prophesy of buddhahood and so attack, ridicule or otherwise hold the teacher of the sutra in contempt.

In Peaceful Action, Open Heart, Thay said that the practice of reciting dharanis aims at reestablishing communication and understanding with the great beings, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, in order to receive their spiritual energy. “We do not walk the spiritual path alone; we walk in the steps of our teachers, friends, fellow practitioners, and all those who have practiced before us, our spiritual ancestors. So the practice of dharanis is a Dharma door that opens up and allows us to receive the energy of those who support us in our practice.”

He gives an example of how this works: “When a dharma teacher offers a teaching while dwelling in *samadhi* with purified body, speech and mind, that power of concentration produces a great source of energy.” And then, if we are able to hear and receive the teaching while we too are dwelling in concentration, that wonderful source of energy will be transmitted to us. It is the same if we hear or read a sutra in this way. The sounds of the words themselves generate a powerful spiritual energy in us, and we will be transformed right away. It happens when body, speech and mind are in harmony and unified in concentration.

We all have the capacity to share the energy of dharanis with others. When my friend, who practices in the Nichiren Buddhist tradition, chants the dharani *nam-myoho-renge-kyo*⁸ in front of the sacred mandala⁹ on the altar in her meditation room, I can feel the energy of her concentrated practice fill the room. When she is finished chanting she sends the energy out for the benefit of all beings.

Om mani padme hum is often placed in Tibetan prayer wheels, sending the healing energy of Avalokiteshvara out in the ten directions as it spins in the wind. In the *Lotus Sutra* the Buddha said that those who offer dharanis as protection and support to practitioners who are able to share the Dharma of the Lotus Blossom will have incalculable happiness. Both “the one who practices and the one who receives” benefit from the sacred practice of reciting dharanis.

Dharani Sutras

Thay said that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas have great powers of concentration, and that is why their words are dharanis:

When these beings dwell in great samadhi, full of the energy of understanding and compassion, the words they speak or the sounds they produce are dharanis. Any sound, any word—even a single phrase or verse from a sutra, such as the Lotus Sutra or the Heart Sutra—that is produced in a state of great concentration has the power to transform.

Prior to preaching the *Lotus Sutra* the Buddha entered a state of deep samadhi. Rising from this state, he began preaching the *Lotus Blossom of the Wonderful Dharma*. This introduction tells us that the *Lotus Sutra* is itself a dharani.

The Heart Sutra, known as the Heart of Perfect Understanding, is held by many to be the “heart” of the *Prajnaparamita* body of sutras of which there are many.¹⁰ The entire sutra is considered to be a dharani, produced by Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva as she practiced in deep samadhi. As Thay explained, “Within Avalokiteshvara there is a great force of wisdom and compassion, and so the words about to be spoken by the bodhisattva are dharanis, produced from her deep insight and great spiritual energy.”

A powerful dharani mantra is offered at the end of the *Heart Sutra* to proclaim the power of the sutra: *gate, gate, para gate, para sam gate, bodhi svaha*: going, going, always going on beyond, always becoming—always being—always birthing and being born Buddha.

Thay cautioned that if we recite dharanis in a rote or superficial way we are not able to receive anything. When we recite or chant dharanis or dharani-sutras with our body, speech and mind in harmony, then we can receive the energy from the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. He said dharanis act as a kind of bridge, a conduit of communication, “a way of holding fast to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and receiving the support of their spiritual energy.”

Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound

In the *Lotus Sutra* chapter, Wonderful Sound, we hear of a Bodhisattva named Wonderful Sound who had served the Sangha in a previous life through his music. As a bodhisattva he is able to hear all manner of sounds and speech, and is able to deeply understand each sound of each being, and see into the true nature of their suffering and well-being.

In **Peaceful Action, Open Heart**, Thay said that those of us who are musicians, composers and singers can follow the path of Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound to help create peace and harmony.

Music can create harmony within us and harmony within the Sangha. Chanting, for instance, helps us concentrate and nourishes our insight, devotion and happiness. During sitting meditation we practice a kind of

music when we recite gathas. By practicing mindful breathing, we can help the Sangha be peaceful and harmonious. This is part of our practice, making the harmonious music of mindfulness within ourselves and sharing that with others. When the Sangha comes together in silence, in deep mindful breathing, this too is a kind of silent music that we can enjoy very much. We sit together in peace and harmony, just producing our being, our full presence in the Sangha, and this is enough to nourish and heal us individually and collectively. This is the kind of musical therapy that can create peace and harmony, and it has the power of healing and transformation.

Thay called this “divine music.” Sound—music and chanting—is one of the ways of practicing the path. “Creating music that has the characteristic of awakening and liberation and that can nourish our faith is a very worthy offering to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. ...We are following the path of Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound when we create sacred music, sacred art, or sacred language.

Plum Village dharani chanting: In our Plum Village tradition we are fortunate to have many talented musicians who are also deep practitioners. Their music, created in Vietnamese, French, English, Italian, Spanish, and many other languages can carry the words of sutras and practices deep into our hearts. The words, intonation, harmonies, melodies, etc. familiar to our own culture and language help us experience these sutras and practices in a deeply familiar way. During the 2004 Winter Retreat at Deer Park, I was profoundly moved by the daily *Heart Sutra* chanting that I could experience (not understand) in the language it was written—Vietnamese, French and Italian. It gave me a body-felt connection with practitioners from other countries. And then, what a precious joy it was to me when we chanted it in English!

We also have musical practitioners steeped in Pali and Sanskrit, who understand the chanting qualities evoked by dharani-sutras and practices such as *The Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore*,¹¹ *Discourse on Love*, and *Invocation of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*. I have found these chants, at least the English versions, to be difficult to learn given their not-so-familiar patterns. So what to do? How do we practice with our Plum Village chants?

On monastic retreats, the monastic community will stand up at the front of the meditation hall near the altar and chant dharanis (“chants”) from our Plum Village chanting book.¹² In this case, we can follow Thay’s suggestion, to harmonize body, speech and mind in concentration by following our breathing, so that we can receive the energy of the monastics’ chanting. In the same way, if we want to listen to the chants at home we can usually find them on a cd or YouTube video. Even if we do not know how to chant them, we can benefit from them by practicing in this concentrated way.

If we truly want to benefit from the dharani chants by learning them and practicing for ourselves, we can take up the words and music, and then practice with cds or

YouTube videos. The best way for me to learn the chants is to find a cd or YouTube video and practice along with those chanting while I follow along with the words and/or music. I am not a musician myself, so it takes lots of hours of practice to learn a difficult chant. However, whether practicing alone or as a community, we can do it. I remember many years ago when our dharma teacher Jerry Braza was so moved by the *Discourse on Love* chant, that he brought the cd back to River Sangha and encouraged everyone to learn it. As I recall, it did not take long, with the collective energy of the sangha, to learn the chant and to chant it beautifully together.

The Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore: Our newest chanting practice challenge is to learn and chant together the *Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore*. The English version of this chant is difficult in that in addition to the melody it includes two part harmonies. However, there are resources available to help the majority of us learn the melody. And if more of us become comfortable with the melody, the harmonies will not overpower us ☺ So, my challenge to you, should you decide to accept it, is to take up learning the melody to this chant. Our own music dharma sister Kri has made it easy. Below is a link to the chant, broken into short sections so that you can practice one section at a time. The link also includes the written music to the sutra chant:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/bxxuw8v6jwc5rxq/AAAEeGeUwjBUiAJLQeKaBdUqa?dl=0>

If you copy and paste this link into your email, anyone should be able to click on it and access the sound files. They live on the web (on Dropbox), so no one has to download or take up personal device memory to access.

If you are not up for learning the chant right now, you can always recite the words, a dharani practice itself. The words can be found at:

<https://plumvillage.org/news/thich-nhat-hanh-new-heart-sutra-translation/>

And here is the chant by Plum Village monastics. If received with mindfulness of our breath, and harmony of body, speech and mind, it can be a powerful dharni practice:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRwA9pZstjY>

Dharani practice is a potent expedient means to help us deepen our connection to the teachings that have been passed down to us over these past 26 centuries. They are another dharma door, or entryway, into the powerful spiritual energy of Avalokiteshvara—the energy understanding and compassion. With dharani practice we can open our mind, our heart and our body to her Great Way of listening and looking.

¹ Edited by Robert Buswell Jr. and Donald Lopez Jr.

² Expounds the ten bodhisattva stages on the bodhisattva path.

³ One of the six paramitas. In this context it refers to the ability of a bodhisattva to bear every kind of abuse from sentient beings, or to bear every kind of hardship without ever losing their commitment to liberate all beings from samsara.

⁴ See: *The [Sutra of the] Blessed Perfection of Wisdom, The Mother of All the Tathagatas, In One Letter*. Translated by Edward Conze. Luzac & Company Ltd., 1973. The letter in this sutra is “A.”

⁵ The dharanis are transliterated, and represent the Japanese *kana* syllables in Roman letters.

⁶ In Buddhism, known as “man-eaters.”

⁷ From **Scripture of the Lotus of the Fine Dharma**, Leon Hurvitz

⁸ This phrase is translated literally as “Homage to the Lotus Sutra.” According to Nichiren Buddhism: In Sanskrit, the language in which it was first written down, the Lotus Sutra’s title is *Saddharma-pundarika-sutra*. Kumarajiva (344–413) translated the Sanskrit title into Chinese as *Miao-fa-lian-hua-jing* (Japanese: *Myoho-enge-kyo*). Chanting this dharani cultivates a practitioner’s vow to transform their own suffering and the suffering of all living beings.

⁹ The mandala or scroll is enshrined on the altar of practitioners. It depicts the “Ceremony in the Air” as described in the *Lotus Sutra*. At this ceremony, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth vow to lead people to happiness during the most tumultuous of times. Practitioners focus on this scroll when they chant.

¹⁰ For more insight into the body of *Prajanaparamita* literature, you may like to refer to **The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism**, edited by Robert Buswell Jr and Donald Lopez Jr.

¹¹ Thay’s new translation of the Heart Sutra.

¹² All of our community’s chants are available in English, with music, in **Chanting from the Heart: Buddhist Ceremonies and Daily Practices**.