



A Gift of Liberation
Course Four—Learning to Be Quiet
Homework Master, Class Two:

1) Every day we make a small, elegant offering upon our new altar. What are 5 different ways in which we should avoid tainting these offerings with some negativity?

[Pabongka Rinpoche instructs us to avoid offerings that have been tainted by 4 ways in which these materials have been obtained improperly. Here are the 5; traditionally, they mostly relate to how monks or nuns might encourage a sponsor to help them with a donation, but of course can be applied to all of us in our daily life—students can be encouraged to answer with their own examples from work or similar situations.

(a) Be careful that you have not obtained the material by pretending to be someone that you are not. In the case of a spiritual practitioner, this refers for example to pretending to be a more devoted practitioner than we really are, when we are around the potential sponsor. In an office situation, this would for example apply to pretending that we have done work that we have not, in order to get a raise.

(b) Offerings purchased with money we have obtained by flattering others, in an insincere way, are considered tainted. For a monk or nun, telling a sponsor how smart they are, just to get a bigger donation from them. In an office situation, telling the boss what a great suit he or she has on today. It is not wrong if praise for a sponsor or supervisor is honest and not motivated by trying to get something out of them.

(c) Offerings bought with funds obtained through hinting. For a spiritual practitioner, saying something like “The bicycle you bought me last year is really great; I can get to the temple in two hours, but with a

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car I could get there in 10 minutes...” trying to get the sponsor to donate a car by hinting. It is not a problem though if we state outright something that could be helpful to us, if the situation is appropriate. In a work situation this might be something like implying to a supplier that you could get them more business if they lowered the price of a product, when in fact you know that you cannot.

(d) Offerings purchased with funds obtained by forcing. This refers to pressuring another person into giving you something that they might not really want to give freely. In a work situation, something for example like making a profit in a company by taking advantage of employees put in a situation where they must work hours that they don't really want to, and which could hurt them or their families.

(e) Offerings obtained through “baiting.” In the context of a religious organization, this would be something like offering a potential sponsor a small, insincere gift in the hopes that they will give us something larger back. Perhaps in a work situation an example would be offering a supervisor an insincere gift in the hopes that they would give us a promotion or a raise.]

2) Pabongka Rinpoche mentions a range of specific motivations behind the offerings upon our altar. Name 4 of these motivations, and describe how we can transform them.

[Here are 4 possible motivations mentioned by Pabongka Rinpoche:

(a) We make offerings on our altar out of some base worldly motivations such as impressing sponsors who might give us some money, or with the hope that people will see our altar and we will start to gain a reputation as a really spiritual person. With work we can transform this into a wish that our altar will be elegant and lovely, and that when visitors to our home see it, this will lead them to have a peaceful and spiritual state of mind, just by being in its presence.

(b) We make offerings with the hopes that it will lead us to have a long life, or be free of illness. Pabongka Rinpoche describes these

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motivations as “not so bad,” and they are easily transformed. We can wish that the karma of making holy offerings will make us physically and emotionally strong for many years to come, so that we can serve others more effectively.

(c) We make offerings with the hope that we ourselves, without thinking about others needing the same thing, might reach a higher rebirth after we die, or else go to some kind of personal nirvana. This can be easily transformed into wishing the same thing for others, simply by imagining that by reaching our own personal goals we will set an example for others who see us and try to do the same.

(d) We make offerings from the very beginning with this motivation, of reaching a place of total happiness, and capacity to serve others, and thus setting an example for everyone else around us. This is bodhichitta, the wish for enlightenment.]

3) How does Pabongka Rinpoche describe the “beauty” of offerings, and why is this important? How is it reflected in our everyday life?

[The name of this section of the teachings on the *lam-rim*, or *steps of the path*, is “Setting forth beautiful offerings.” Pabongka Rinpoche first notes that this refers not only to putting out offerings which are beautiful, but also to setting them out in an attractive arrangement.

Even just in setting out offering bowls with water in them, for example, he encourages us to do so in a mindful and thoughtful way, making sure that they are in a carefully straight row, and filled to the same pleasant, full level.

Again, a big part of this offering is the effect that it will have upon our own mind—an unconscious mirroring of this beauty and peacefulness, the goal of our meditation practice. And of course the same effect that it has upon those who come into our room and lay their eyes on this uncommonly lovely corner of a modern house. Lastly of course we are making the most beautiful offering that we can to our Lama, and to the other holy beings associated with our altar.

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In our day-to-day life, we can do the same. Without pride, or vanity, or wishing to attract unwanted attention of the opposite sex, we can nonetheless try to be elegant and beautiful—in our behavior and in our appearance—as an offering to the world: something like a lovely flower on the side of the road, which everyone can appreciate, which brings happiness and peace to everyone.]

4) What does Pabongka Rinpoche say about having others help us with our offerings, and how does this apply to other parts of our spiritual practice?

[The Rinpoche mentions a story where Lord Atisha, a great Indian teacher who helped start the lamrim lineage in Tibet, was becoming too old to pour out his own offering bowls without his hands shaking uncontrollably. His disciples asked him if they could pour out the offering for him, and he replied: “Are you also going to eat my food for me?”

The point is that there is a great power to offering things with our own hands. The Rinpoche also mentions the ancient kings of India and Tibet, who would on special days make gifts of money and other materials to the poor or needy. And they would always do it with their own hands—as should we.

In our own case, this applies not only to offerings upon our altar, but to material help or personal assistance which we give to others. As much as possible, we should “get our hands dirty,” trying to find situations where we not only share the great ideas of our path with others, but also perform “hands-on” service of the poor and needy.

Otherwise our practice is destined to be one-sided, and incomplete, and not bring us the joy that it should. We need to help, and with our own hands.]

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5) What does Pabongka Rinpoche say about the quality of the material which we use for an offering, and how does this apply to other aspects of our spiritual life?

[Pabongka Rinpoche talks about “the yellow and the blue,” and says that we should not offer them. What he’s talking about is a flower which has begun to wilt on one corner, or a piece of Tibetan cheese which has started to go bad and has a bit of green or blue on it somewhere.

The point is that—even when we are simply offering water—we should offer the best that we can afford, within our means. If we really believe that our Lama or some other enlightened being is partaking of the offerings on our altar, then we have to offer the best, as if the Dalai Lama himself had just shown up for lunch.

Obviously this applies even more to when we offer something directly to our Lama, or to another person who is helping us greatly along the path. If Lama visits our home, then everything should be first class all the way: clean up carefully, buy fresh groceries that you know they would enjoy, plan on tackling another page from Julia Child, set out fresh flowers in the colors they would like.

The more energy and time that we put into honoring our own personal Teacher, the more happiness will come to us. We have to resist the temptation to be lazy on this, even when it is clear that the Teacher doesn’t personally care if they have a fancy meal or not.]

6) Pabongka Rinpoche relates a story about different qualities of incense used for an offering. How does this relate to our spiritual path in general?

[The Rinpoche tells a story of a monk who was very poor, and had no money at all to purchase incense to be burned upon the altar. And so he collected a particularly fragrant kind of grass that could substitute.

Because of the karma of making this offering, the monk’s finances improved and he was able to purchase normal incense. And because of

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this karma, there came a day that he could offer incense that might cost thousands of dollars for a small quantity.

This applies to how karma begins an upward cycle in the life of any of us who practices sincerely. At the beginning perhaps we have nothing: no financial security; no friends, no partner; poor health; and perhaps we are unable to find our own personal Teacher, or to be close to them.

But then with the process of offering help and love to others, our karma begins to change. We help others materially, and our own finances begin to improve, to the point where we can help more, and see infinitely more improvement. We help others who are lonely, and more and more friends appear—and a partner.

We help the sick, and suddenly our yoga improves. We share what ideas we understand, and more and more teachers appear in our lives. Pabongka Rinpoche's incense story is an important lesson in upward cycles: in the continual reinvestment of karma.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, thinking about how we will set aside a meditation space in our own home, and also about how we would like the altar to be. And then thinking about how we relate to this altar, as a center where enlightened deeds, words, and thoughts will stay. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations.