

PURIFICATION WITH THE FOUR OPPONENT POWERS

When we learn about and reflect on karma, we might feel uncomfortable about the negative actions we have done and the consequences we are likely to face in the future. But there is a solution to this—the practice of purification. Negative karma is not something fixed, permanent, and irreparable. The imprints left on our mind from our negative actions can be purified so that we don't have to experience the suffering results that would otherwise come, and so we can clear this negative energy out of the way of our spiritual development. That is the reason for the practice of purification.

There is no negativity that cannot be purified. The purification process is basically a psychological one. As Lama Yeshe says, it is our mind (and on the basis of that, our actions) that creates the negativity, and it is our mind that transforms it by creating positive energy. Although in Buddhism we rely on Buddha's methods for purification, it is not the Buddha who purifies us; we ourselves, as Lama says, do the work. We created the karma, and only we can clean it up.

The practice of purification involves contemplating the four opponent powers: regret, reliance, remedy and resolve. It is best to do a practice of purification each day— for example, at the end of the day— to clear up whatever negative karma we created that day, as well as negativities from the past.

1. *The Power of Regret*

Regret involves recognizing that certain actions we have done are negative because they harmed others and/or ourselves, because they will bring more problems later on, and also because we were acting in an ego-centered, deluded way. Regret is not the same as guilt. Guilt comes from not understanding the true nature of things, and believing that we have a real, permanent self or "I." We focus on things we have done wrong, or things we feel we should have done but didn't do, and we feel "I'm bad, and I will always be this way." Guilt may also cause us to feel that we don't deserve to be happy. It tends to be more emotional rather than rational and intelligent. It's not helpful to feel guilty—it doesn't bring any positive results, but only makes us miserable and blocks our spiritual development.

Regret on the other hand is intelligent and constructive. It is based on the understanding of karma: that negative actions such as killing or hurting others cause suffering to them as well as to ourselves, both now and in the future. Harming others disturbs our mind— we're going against our true, pure nature— and leaves imprints that will ripen as more problems and suffering in the future. Whatever problems and unwanted experiences we've had in this life are the results of negative actions we did in the past, and the negative actions we do now are the cause of future suffering. Who wants that? So logically, what we need to do is feel regret and clean up our karma!

Regret is likened to the way we would feel if we found out that something we had swallowed was poisonous. Fearful of getting sick or losing our life, we would drop everything and rush to our doctor's or the emergency room to rid ourselves of the poison.

In the same way, negative karma is highly toxic: it poisons our mind, our spiritual development, and brings unwanted troubles in the future. Understanding this, we regret our mistakes and do whatever we can to clear up the karma.

2. *The Power of Reliance*

When we fall down on the ground, we rely on the ground to get up again. Similarly, when we do something negative, it's either in relation to pure beings such as the Buddha or our spiritual teacher, or in relation to ordinary sentient beings, so in order to purify our negative karma, we need to recall and rely upon those two objects. First, we rely on the Buddha, who is like the doctor whose medicine we take to purify our deluded actions. It's not that we need Buddha to forgive us (although he always does anyway); rather, we rely on him by taking refuge in him and using the methods he taught to purify ourselves and to change our life and our behaviour to a more positive direction.

For someone who's not a Buddhist, this first step could involve renewing your commitment to follow the guidance of whoever is your object of devotion, or re-dedicating yourself to whatever positive goals you aspire to live by. It is also very effective to confess your misdoings to someone you trust, such as a spiritual teacher.

Second, we rely on other beings—the very beings we have harmed, in this life and in the past—by developing compassion and love for them. You can think about how they are basically just like you: they don't want to experience the slightest suffering or problem, and they only want to be happy and peaceful. Then, generate the sincere determination to try your best to avoid harming others, and instead do what you can to help them.

3. *The Power of Remedy*

This means doing something positive in order to counteract the negative energy we have created. In general, any positive action can be used to purify our negative karma, but certain practices are particularly powerful remedies. These include visualizing figures such as Shakyamuni Buddha, Vajrasattva, or the Thirty-Five Buddhas and reciting their names and/or mantras. The meditations on love, compassion and emptiness can also be used—the latter is actually said to be the best antidote to negativity, although it is difficult and may not be suitable for beginners. A simpler method is the purification meditation using the breath. Choose one of these methods each time you do a session of purification practice.

You can also do more engaged activities such as volunteer work or making donations to charitable causes. Saving lives—for example, rescuing animals or insects who are in danger of dying or being killed, or caring for the ill—is particularly effective to counteract the karma of killing. It is also good to apologize and make amends to the people you have harmed, if this is possible to do.

4. *The Power of Resolve*

The fourth step is an extremely important one: making the determination not to repeat the same negative actions again. Without this, it's very hard to change, to give up our old bad habits. Determination to not harm again is like a beacon that guides our body, speech and mind in new directions. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, "We can mold our minds into any shape we like."

With the heavier negative actions, such as killing and stealing, you may be able to resolve never to do them again for the rest of your life. (Of course, this means resolving to give up doing such actions *intentionally*. It's impossible to avoid certain unintentional actions, for example, killing insects we can't see while we are walking or driving.)

However, with those actions that are more habitual and hard to stop, such as lying or losing your temper, you need to be realistic. It's better to resolve to not do them for shorter periods of time, like five minutes or an hour. You can then gradually increase the length of time of such promises— a half-day, then one day, and so on.

Then resolve in general to make the effort to avoid the old habits. This determination not to do again is what gives us the strength to turn ourselves around. We need to have confidence in our ability to change, one step at a time.

THE PRACTICE

Sit comfortably and relax. Spend some time focusing on the breath to calm your mind and center it in the present. Then generate a positive motivation for doing the practice, for example, "I am doing this meditation not just for myself, but for others—to learn to be less harmful, and more helpful, to them."

Take as much time as you need to contemplate each of the four powers thoroughly, to generate the right state of mind for each point.

1. The Power of Regret

Think back over the day, from the time you woke up this morning, and try to remember anything you did that was negative. Start with actions of the body, such as killing or causing physical suffering to any being... taking something that did not belong to you, or not paying money you owed, like a bus fare... or engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior....

Then check if you did anything negative with your speech, such as lying, exaggerating, or being deceitful..... saying words that caused bad feelings between people.... saying things that were hurtful or upsetting to someone.... or spending time gossiping or talking about insignificant things.

Then see if you can remember negative thoughts you may have indulged in, such as wishing harm on somebody or feeling happy at their misfortune... critical, judgemental thoughts towards anyone, including yourself... feeling dissatisfied with what you have and wishing for more or better, or for what someone else has.... in short, any states of mind that involved hatred, anger, greed, jealousy, arrogance, selfishness, and so forth.

Also bring to mind any negative actions you recall doing in past days, months, and years, going as far back in your life as you can..... Generate sincere regret, from the depths of your heart, for all these actions, by understanding that they are the cause of suffering—in some cases, to others, and in all cases, to yourself. These actions planted imprints on your mind that will ripen as problems and misfortune in the future. They also impede your progress on the spiritual path, and prolong your existence in an imperfect, unsatisfactory situation. Realize that no one wants to suffer, and these are the very things that bring suffering, so acknowledge your mistakes and feel a sincere wish to rectify them.

2. The Power of Reliance

If there is a holy being or higher power endowed with unconditional love, compassion, and wisdom, and towards whom you feel respect and confidence, then bring them to mind. Acknowledge your mistakes and the difficulty you have refraining from negative actions and attitudes on your own. Ask for help and guidance so that you can change yourself and give up these negativities from now on.

Alternatively, you can bring to mind the ethical principles that you believe in but acted against, and renew your commitment to follow them.

Then, for the negative actions you did to others, generate love and compassion. Contemplate the fact that, just like you, others do not want to suffer and they wish to experience only happiness and peace. Feel how desirable it would be to stop harming them and instead be kind and helpful to them. Generate the altruistic wish to purify your negative actions and your delusions such as anger, greed and selfishness, so that from now on you can only benefit others, not harm them.

3. The Power of Remedy

Now you need to do something positive to counteract the negative energy you created. If you feel comfortable about visualizing an enlightened being, as mentioned above, you can visualize a figure such as Buddha or Vajrasattva above your head. While reciting the appropriate mantra, imagine light flowing down from the figure, filling your entire body and mind and purifying all your negative karma and delusions.

If you do not feel comfortable to visualize such a figure, you can imagine a sphere of light above your head, thinking that it represents all enlightened qualities and energies, and visualize light flowing down from it and filling you (as above). If you wish, you could recite the short mantra of Vajrasattva (*om vajrasattva hum*) or the mantra of Avalokitesvara (*om mani padme hum*) while visualizing the light filling and purifying you.

Alternatively, you can do one of the other meditations suggested above, such as love; or decide to act in more positive ways in your daily life, such as being more helpful or generous.

4. The Power of Resolve

If you feel confident that you can completely give up some negative actions, such as killing and stealing, make the promise to do that. But for those negative actions you cannot completely give up, either promise to give them up for a realistic period of time, or promise that you will do your very best to be mindful and avoid doing them.

Resolve to change your old emotional habits such as anger, jealousy, depression, criticalness and attachment. Feel confident in your ability to change, but at the same time understand that it takes time to change, so don't have unrealistic expectations.

Dedication

At the end of the meditation session dedicate all the positive energy you have created by doing this purification practice to all living beings, that they may become free from all their suffering and its causes: negative karma and delusions.

Extracted from How to Meditate, second edition, by Kathleen McDonald