

Best mantras¹

The word *mantra* (Pali *manta*) comes from the root √MAN, “to think,” which is also the root for words like *mano* (the mind), *muni* (wise sage on account of his mental silence), *mantā* (a wise man, counsellor or advisor). A mantra then is a kind of mental tool that expedites our efforts in stilling the mind for the sake of realizing wisdom. There’s nothing magical about it; it works safely with effort and mindfulness.

MANTRA-BASED MEDITATION. **The elder Cūḷa Panthaka** is said to be amongst the slowest of the monks. After he becomes a monk, in the course of 4 months, he is unable to remember even a single stanza of teaching. His brother tells him to return to lay-life, so that he contemplates giving up the training. Learning of this, the Buddha teaches him a special but simple mantra-based meditation.

He is told to sit facing the sun (eastward), and holding a clean piece of rag on his palm and rubbing it mindfully, while repeating the word *rajôharaṇam* (literally “removing dust,” “dusting away”). As he does this, the rag becomes more and more soiled. Then he thinks, “This piece of rag was perfectly clean. But on account of this person here, it has lost its old nature and become soiled. Impermanent indeed are formations [things in the world]!”

Grasping the thought of decay and death, he develops insight. The Buddha, learning that wisdom has arisen in him, says, “Cūḷa Panthaka, you should not merely see that only this piece of rag has become soiled with dirt, but even within you are the dust of lust and so on. Remove them!”

The Buddha then teaches him that it is greed, hate and delusion, not dust, that are really “dirt,” and one who has rid himself of this real dirt, dwells “dirt-free” (awakened) in the teaching. Upon hearing this instruction, Cūḷa Panthaka fully awakens.²

In due course, in connection with the occasion, the Buddha utters this Dhammapada verse before the assembly of monks:

By striving, by diligence, by restraining and self-control,
the wise makes himself an island which no flood can overwhelm. Dh 25

RIPENING OF PAST KARMA. Here’s another related case. It is said that when **Mahā Kappina**, the rajah of Kukkuṭa, vatī, hears the word “Buddha (*buddho*)” from the merchants visiting his capital, at once experiences rapture (due to the ripening of his past good karma). On learning that the Buddha has arisen in the world, he rides off with his entourage to see the Buddha. So deep is his faith, it is said, that the whole band crosses *three* rivers, without his or any of his entourage even wetting their horses’ hoofs!³

The significance of this story is that faith can move mountains -- or at least allow us to move at high speed and unimpeded by anything. A simpler, more practical explanation is that the rajah’s

¹ Abridged from *Buddhānussati*, SD 15.7 (3.10): [link](#).

² For references, see SD 15.7 (5.10): [link](#). On [the need of dhyana for attaining arhathood](#), see **Samatha & vipassana**, SD 41.1 (2.2.2.4). See also *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (13): [link](#); **Samadhi**, SD 33.1a (2.2-2.5): [link](#); **The layman and dhyana**, SD 8.5 (9): [link](#).

³ See **Miracles**, SD 27.5a (5.1.7): [link](#).

mind is so focussed on the word “Buddha” that he is able to move most comfortably and speedily to his spiritual goal.

This story is also significant in showing that even a short, single-word mantra -- “Buddha” (*buddho*) -- is good enough for mental concentration and wholesome accomplishment. Indeed, the best mantras for meditation are often the shortest and easiest to remember. Once our minds are focussed with the mantra’s help (if we need such a help), then we gently flow with our meditation into mental stillness.⁴

Bodhi Rāja,kumāra’s mantra. The **Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 85) records the unique manner in which prince Bodhi goes for refuge. On meeting the Buddha, he exults, “O the Buddha! O the Dharma! O that the Dharma is well taught!” His servant boy, the brahmin youth Sañjikā,putta, perplexed by the prince’s action, asks him why he does not go for refuge to “the three jewels” by reciting the traditional formula, which is the usual way.

Prince Bodhi then explains that even while he was in his mother’s womb, she had gone before the Buddha and declared that her child (be it a boy or a girl) had gone for refuge to three jewels: this was his first refuge-going. Then, when the Buddha was staying in the Bhesakaḷā forest, outside Suṃsumāra,giri (Bodhi’s home-town), his nurse, holding him on her hips, again declared to the Buddha that prince Bodhi went for refuge to the three jewels.

Then on this occasion itself (the event recounted in the Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Sutta), he himself goes for refuge to the three jewels -- for the *third* time! So he rejoices in the Buddha.⁵ As such, this is a beautiful mantra we can use to recall this joyful event or our own devotion to the three jewels, before we start our meditation.

The brahminee Dhānañjānī’s mantra. The **(Brahma,cārī) Saṅgārava Sutta** (M 100) recounts how once the young brahmin student Saṅgārava sees the lady Dhānañjānī trip, and hears her exclaiming thrice, “Homage to the Buddha, the arhat, the perfect self-awakened one” (*namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā,sambuddhassa*). He chides her for extolling a “shaveling monk,” but when she tells him of the Buddha’s marvellous qualities, he desires to see him.⁶

This is the “opening mantra” or “universal mantra,” known even in the suttas themselves, and is as such not invented by mantra-makers or teachers of later times. The point here is that of simplicity and authenticity. By understanding the marvellous history of this salutation (*vandanā*) to the Buddha, we at once connect with the suttas and related sacred words voiced since the Buddha’s own times, beyond any ethnicity or sectarianism, beyond Buddhism itself, back to the Buddha Dharma.

The *namo tassa* mantra can be recited any time we wish, recalling the Buddha and his virtues as we do this, or simply reflecting on the impermanence of its sound or thought. A good daily habit is this: just as we close our eyes preparing to fall asleep, we should mindfully and joyfully recite *namo tassa* as many times as we like. Over time, the mantra might even arise naturally

⁴ Further see **(Nīvaraṇā) Saṅgārava S** (S 46.55/5:121-126), SD 3.12: [link](#) & **(Manta) Saṅgārava S** (A 5.193/3:230-236), SD 73.3.

⁵ M 8,60/2:96 = SD 55.2.

⁶ M 100,1-2/2:209 = SD 10.9: [link](#) & **Dhanañjānī S** (S 7.1/1:160), SD 45.5.

by itself in our heart, so that we need only to focus our mind on it, stilling it and falling asleep happily and waking happily, again with the *namo tassa* mantra on our mind.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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