

Medicine Buddha

A simple ceremony

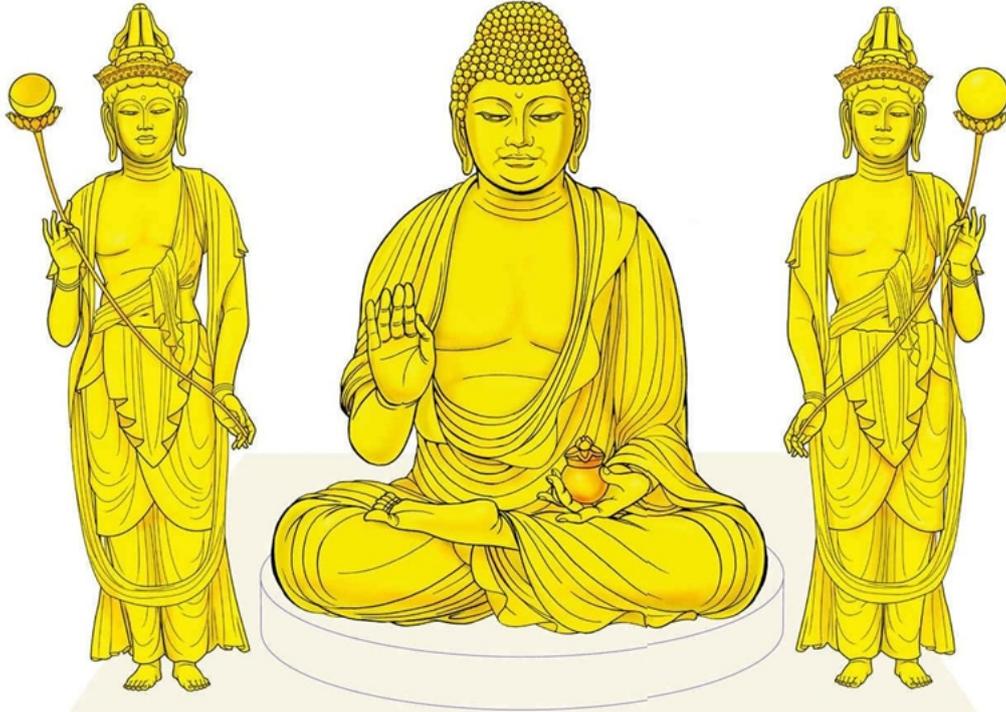
When encountering illness or disease, we experience a loss of balance, strength and vitality. Contagion disrupts whole societies. Easy tasks become difficult or impossible. Those who are sick depend heavily on the assistance of others, while they are also at the mercy of chance and conditions. Impermanence is suddenly obvious, while life's precarious nature asserts itself. Our priorities come into question as the future grows uncertain, and leisure fades into irrelevance. Death is recognized in its immediacy, as we can no longer pretend time is abundant.

Fear, worry, and regret may overwhelm those who are afflicted, as well as those who are helping. Susceptibility and relatedness are thrown into sharp relief. Anger and sadness drain precious energy. Loneliness and helplessness add insult to injury.

Individuals, as well as cultures, respond to illness in different ways – some with denial, some with confusion, some with resolve, some with equanimity. Whatever the case, illness tests our ability to maintain a balance between doing what needs to be done, and accepting what cannot be changed.

The purpose of this practice is to cultivate individual capacity for balance between action and acceptance, deepen one's understanding of illness and death as part of being alive, and awaken from the dreamlike confusion perpetuated through habitual reactions, thus becoming more able and available to assist others.

Start by creating a sacred space, perhaps a simple shrine. Place an image, if you have one, of the Medicine Buddha, as a symbolic representation of original mind as source of steadiness and resourcefulness. In front of it, set offerings of flowers, light (candle) and incense. Medicine Buddha is known as *Bhaiṣajyaguru*, or Master of Healing (jap. *Yakushi*, tib. *Menla*). He's often flanked by the Bodhisattvas Sunlight and Moonlight. More complex presentations give seven forms of Medicine Buddha, as well as a mandala featuring Medicine Buddha surrounded by eight Bodhisattvas. Just as Buddha Limitless Light, known as *Amitābha*, in the western Realm of Joy guides those who encounter death, so the Medicine Buddha in his eastern Realm of Pure lapis lazuli guides those who encounter illness. What follows is a simple ceremony.



Gakkō Bosatsu
(Candraprabha: Moonlight bodhisattva)
月光菩薩

Yakushi Nyorai
(Bhaiṣajyaguru: Medicine Buddha)
薬師如来

Nikkō Bosatsu
(Sūryaprabha: Sunlight bodhisattva)
日光菩薩



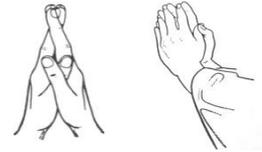
Approach the place of practice and make three prostrations. Light the candle, then light the incense, offer flowers, and place a glass or cup of water. Arrange your seat, the objects on the altar, and assume a comfortable posture.

Homage

Hands held in vajra clasp seal (*vajra añjali*)

Homage to all buddhas everywhere.

(Repeat three times.)



Refuge and Awakening Mind

hūṃ hūṃ hūṃ

I take refuge in all the sources of refuge,
The three jewels — buddha, dharma and sangha, and
The three roots — teacher, deity and protector.
In order to lead all beings to buddhahood
I arouse the awakening mind.

(Repeat three times.)

Note

The ceremony opens with refuge and awakening mind, reflections that renew our connection with the direction of our practice and our motivation.

Creating the Presence of Bhaiṣajyaguru

Hands held in lotus clasp seal (*padma añjali*)

oṃ ā hūṃ

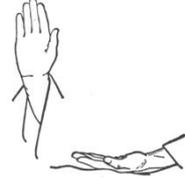
Wonderful Medicine Buddha,
Master of Healing and King of Lapis Lazuli,
Bodhisattvas Sunlight and Moonlight, and others,
Buddhas, bodhisattvas beyond reckoning,
I pray to you with single-minded devotion.
Inspire in me the unwavering acceptance and awakening of light that heals.
Just so, may peace come to each being everywhere!



Right hand in fearless seal, palm facing forward at chest level, left hand in samadhi seal. For a stronger seal, place the tip of left thumb into a closed fist at left hip, holding the elbow away from the body. Right hand stays the same.

*oṃ huru huru cāṇḍālī mātangī svāhā **

(Repeat mantra 21 times.)



Note

Imagine that Bhaiṣajyaguru is present in front of you, attended by Candraprabha on his right and Sūryaprabha on his left. Bhaiṣajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha, is golden-skinned and wears the traditional monastic robes. Left hand in meditation seal (*samādhi mudrā*) holds a small bowl of *amṛta*, nectar of immortality. Right hand makes a fearless seal (*abhaya mudrā*), palm open forward at chest level. He sits on a lotus throne of liberation, with splendour of wisdom and compassion surrounding his form.



He represents mind's steadfast freshness, a function of awareness present in all experience. *Nirbhaya* or *abhaya* is an unwavering tranquility, often rendered as fearlessness, but also interpreted as *āśvāsa* – meaning recovery, refreshment and vitalization – the ability to recover breath, to take heart, and thus to resolutely face adversity. The literal sense of “no fear” can be misleading, unhealthy, and possibly dangerous.

Sūryaprabha and Candraprabha appear as bodhisattvas, representing how awareness takes compassionate expression in dire circumstances, as moonlike cooling gentleness and sunlike undaunted resolve. They both display wish-granting seals (*varada mudrā*), mirroring each other.

Recite the mantra for Medicine Buddha a number of times, feeling your own yearning to be at peace with life and responsive to circumstances, warts and all.

*This is the version in Japanese sources. Tibetan sources use *oṃ bhaiṣajye bhaiṣajye mahābhaiṣajye bhaiṣajyaraje samudgate svāhā*, along with the wish-granting seal (*varada mudrā*) and lapis blue body. This longer mantra stems from the healing dhāraṇī *namo bhagavate bhaiṣajyaguru vaiḍūryaprabharājāya tathāgatāya arahate samyaksambuddhāya tadyathā oṃ bhaiṣajye bhaiṣajye bhaiṣajyasamudgate svāhā*, as given in the *Bhaiṣajyaguru-vaiḍūryaprabhārāja sūtra*.

Prayer of Healing

om ā hūm

In this sacred place, the eastern Realm of Pure Lapis Lazuli,
Our family has gathered, seeking guidance and protection.
We find ourselves transported by noble wishes made long ago.
Facing difficulties, we acknowledge our faults and atone for mistakes.



Here we present beautiful offerings, real and imagined,
And to them we add our profound thoughts of good will and well-being.
Great good and understanding come from these thoughts
And give power to these wishes we make.

When we encounter disease and face the prospect of death,
It's easy to be overwhelmed by anxiety, confusion and despair.
May we recognize the unity of experience and awareness,
The mother and son clear light.
May we find a path free from fear, panic, and alarm
And receive the blessings of the Master of Healing
With his retinue of bodhisattvas.

Free from the threats and distress of ordinary existence,
May we be transformed as vajrasattva and face buddha
In the visionary Realm of Pure Lapis Lazuli.
Receiving guidance, may we complete all the stages of the bodhisattva path,
Come to full awakening and develop the ability
To help all beings without discrimination become free of pain.

Here, healing is sought and healing found.
May this light that shines with the gentle splendour of dauntless awareness,
Clear away the darkness of conditioning, confusing emotions, and the distortions of
reactions and concepts.
May it illumine the path of unwavering acceptance
And reveal the way to a never-fading ease.

Note

Think of the afflicted, young and old, recovering, struggling, and dying, and say the Prayer of Healing. Vajrasattva symbolizes the potential for awakening that unfolds naturally when conditions are right.

Partaking of Medicine

(Hold the glass of water at your heart.)

The water that heals, nourishes and cleanses

Is the water of pristine awareness.

Having no shape, it is the water of empty presence,

Being transparent, it is the water of vivid appearance,

Being fresh, it is the water of spontaneous arising.

Three waters of the three families

Wash away the three poisons,

Sustain the three bodies,

And reveal the three mysteries of being.

(Drink in three sips.)



Note

Take the glass/cup with your right hand and bring it to your heart, with left palm underneath. As you drink a sip, imagine golden light arising from your heart center and filling the body, as body becomes an orb of light. Drink again and imagine golden light blazing forth and filling space in all directions, everything dissolving and becoming light. As you drink once more, imagine golden light returning and entering the heart center. Return the glass to its place with your right hand. Breathe in deeply, and bring your hands into meditation seal (*dharmadhātu samādhi mudrā*), right hand over left hand in your lap, fingers overlapping, thumbs gently touching. Breathing out, relax and rest naturally for a couple of minutes. If you get distracted, realign your posture, breathe in and out, relaxing and resting again.

Dedication

Master of Healing, King of Lapis Lazuli,

With Sunlight and Moonlight at your side,

And innumerable sacred beings

In the beautiful Realm of Pure Lapis Lazuli,

Through the power of the goodness done here today,

May we restore balance and find natural presence.



Thus, simply by my giving voice to this wish,
May the buddhas of the ten directions
Inspire in me its fulfillment
Free from impediments and obstacles.

Awakening mind is precious.
May it arise where it has not arisen.
May it not weaken where it has arisen
May it ever grow and flourish.

bhai bhai bhai

Note

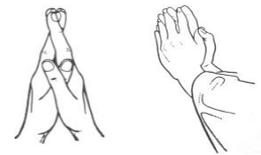
Recite the dedication prayers, praying that the good of performing this ceremony serves to help all beings.

After the ceremony, sit quietly for a few minutes, letting sensations, feelings and thoughts sort themselves out. Before standing up, repeat homage.

Homage

Homage to all buddhas everywhere.

(Repeat three times.)



Before standing up, check the altar – candle, incense, flowers. Stand up, put your seat in order, then make three prostrations before leaving.



Postscript

If it is better for me to become ill,
Give me the energy to be ill.
If it is better for me to stay healthy,
Give me the energy to be healthy.
If it is better for me to die,
Give me the energy to die.

This simple ceremony for trying times of illness was put together by Hōkai Sobol in March 2020 in Rijeka, Croatia, during the coronavirus pandemic lockdown. The prayers are adapted from Ken McLeod's "A Passage to Light" with kind permission. Mudrā, mantra and sacred imagery follow the Japanese *shingon mikkyō* tradition. Practice notes merely suggest a possible way of engaging this ceremony. If there is any merit in composing this manual, may it help others find a path to peace.

Illustration on page 2 from Ayako Ishii, *Buddhist Statuary*, drawings by Iwasaki Jun, Shogakukan 2017.
Illustrations of mudrā from E. Dale Saunders, *Mudrā: A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture*, drawings by Mark Hasserliis, Bollingen Series LVIII, Pantheon Books 1960.

Hōkai Sobol 2020

