

An Introduction to Ngöndro

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This teaching is excerpted from the complete teachings on the Ati Zabdön ngöndro, given by Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche in 2012 at Mindrolling Lotus Garden, during the vajrayana section of Annual Retreat. This copy is for your use only and not to be distributed or reproduced in any form.

An Introduction to Ngöndro

Many practitioners are now doing ngöndro very dedicatedly or are inspired to begin the ngöndro practices. Therefore, to provide a strong foundation for your practices and an understanding of just how important ngöndro is, this is a good time to refer to the Ati Zabdön commentary on ngöndro.

The name of the liturgy and root text is *Ati Zabdön*, “The Profound Essence.” This cycle of teachings and transmissions is more formally designated *Ati Zabdön Ngöndro*. One could do a shorter commentary on working with ngöndro. Sometimes being simpler is good; it may bring more confidence and courage to engage in the practices. On the negative side, you may then come up with a lot of notions or “rumors” about ngöndro. So here we will touch on many, if not all, of the main headings and details of the practices known as ngöndro, or “preliminaries.”

NGÖNDRO: THE FOUNDATION OF VAJRAYANA

Preliminaries usually refer to things that precede. However there seem to be many different ideas about this term. Some of you write to me to say that you stopped doing ngöndro and now you want to “go back”—as if to say back to basics, as if the preliminaries were like going back to the kindergarten level of vajrayana. Instead, the preliminaries should be seen as the “leaders,” giving direction to your whole vajrayana path of practice. This is the way the great masters related to ngöndro.

Kyabje Trulshik Rinpoche, for example, even in his eighties, never went a day without doing the ngöndro practices. The last scolding I got from Rinpoche was for not doing enough prostrations. After I told him I was doing fifty prostrations a day, he said that he was doing 100. [Rinpoche laughs.] It was the same with the other great masters. Kyabje Tenga Rinpoche, even after losing his limbs, never went a day without doing ngöndro practices. Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche kept ngöndro as his daily practice right up to the end of his life. And Kyabje Trichen Rinpoche, even when he couldn’t walk, still kept ngöndro as his main practice.

This is the way ngöndro is traditionally seen—not as a prelude to other practices or something to get over with quickly. As Patrul Rinpoche says, ngöndro is the very foundation of vajrayana practices. It is extremely important to understand how the powerful methods of the preliminary practices bring about a much more realistic approach to severing our delusions, and how, beyond just visualizing and reciting, they enable us to actually *realize* the view of mahayana.

The journey into vajrayana can only be made through a direct understanding and actual realization of the mahayana view.

Vajrayana and the Mahayana View

The Mahayana emphasizes the need to understand the complete nature of all phenomena. It is a view of “wholeness.”

Ordinarily, the mind merely connects with appearances: the appearance of forms, sounds, thoughts, feelings, and so on. We then make assumptions based on *how* things appear, how they sound, how they feel. This is a very subtle moment: this moment of grasping at some impression, clinging to it, and in that grasping and clinging, immediately articulating an assumption.

Simply put: you do not take time to fully understand what you see, hear, think, or feel. Your understanding arises from fleeting moments that can only produce assumptions, all of which are based on what you stand to gain or lose in the moment. This builds up sediments of deluded perception, through which you cannot see things clearly.

It is not the sights, sounds, thoughts, and feelings that are deluded; *you* create delusions, through the speed of making biased assumptions. When the mind has no time to open up to the wholeness, or completeness, of appearances, the sediment of delusion settles into “good” and “bad” assumptions. And at that point, every form, sound, thought, and other sensation you relate is dominated by ego’s personal preferences and convenience.

The Power of Perception

To understand vajrayana, know that we are talking about perception.

What is meant by the “complete” nature of perception? What makes a sound or thought “whole”? Are they merely what you imagine them to be, or is there more to it? A very traditional analogy is this: When someone comes to you with a complaint, are you able to really appreciate the whole story—whether you like that person or not? A wise person will listen to the whole story and give an unbiased judgment in the situation. Any judgment based merely on appearances is an ignorantly made judgment, and any decision will be very biased or partial. This example applies to the habitual ways we relate to everything we see, hear, and think.

Our judgments and opinions about appearances are very powerful, in that they become causes that bring about effects. The karma we create builds a sphere of experience for ourselves and for the world at large. Karma is *propelled* by our opinions and judgments, and when those opinions and judgments are not sane, they bring about negative karma.

No one intends to create negative karma. But a mind that does not perceive things sanely, or wholly, churns out unending amounts of karma. And karma dominated by ego’s biased views, preferences, and conveniences becomes negative karma—simply by not seeing things clearly and completely.

Seeing Things as They Are

The Mahayana trains one in clear seeing using the hinayana approach of self-discipline and taming the mind—together with the mahayana motivation of compassion. In the mahayana, it is through compassion towards all sentient beings that one sees things more clearly. The vajrayana approach is to relate to things more clearly by seeing them as they are.

The vajrayana says: You are relating to things at every moment. Why not relate to them completely and wholly from the start by seeing things as they are? But for this to happen, the vajrayana must build upon a strong foundation of hinayana discipline and mahayana compassion, and a fuller understanding of the nature of self and phenomena.

This comes back to the mahayana view and madhyamika teachings on emptiness. A mind working with the emptiness nature of self and phenomena should not only be able to *think* about emptiness, it should be able to manifest confidence in that view in relating to all phenomena.

In Theory and in Practice

One cannot just say, “All phenomena are empty by nature; they’re just projections of my mind and this perceiving mind, itself, is empty.” Knowing this in theory, you should be able to walk out and relate to everything from that perspective, including your own mind. And then—seeing the nature of the perceiving mind, itself, to be empty—you should be able to relate to your own craving and grasping.

Actualization of the mahayana and madhyamika view in postmeditation comes from actualization in study and meditation. A very good bridge between theory and full engagement is the “Seven Branch Offering Prayer.” Similarly the ngöndro practices and, later, the creation stages of vajrayana are a bridge between intellectual understanding and its actualization in postmeditation. Their actual meeting ground is in the methods of visualization and recitation. By fully engaging the body, speech, and mind, the vajrayana methods allow you to challenge your understanding of the emptiness of self and phenomena.

This is the purpose of the practices of ngöndro.

THE TRADITION OF NGÖNDRO

The tradition of ngöndro is connected to the *terma* tradition of Padmasambhava, who came from India to teach Buddhism in Tibet. His teachings there were so numerous that some of them had to be hidden, to be discovered at a later time. They were then transmitted by manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, himself, or his twenty-five principle disciples, who were also great accomplished beings. These teachings became known as *terma*, or “treasure teachings.”

Each terma teaching that is discovered becomes a whole cycle of teachings, with its own principle deity. For example, there are deities for terma based on Chenrezig, Manjushri, Vajrayogini, Chakrasamvara, and Vajrakilaya—all ultimately gathered into the single essence of Vajrasattva. And each cycle of terma teachings further comprises three stages: its own preliminaries; a main body of creation and completion instructions; and concluding practices of mahamudra and mahasandhi, or dzogchen, the teachings on actually realizing the nature of mind.

The Many Kinds of Ngöndro

For as many treasure teachings and individual deities there are, there are that many diverse ngöndros. These days people may just say “Kagyu ngöndro” or “Nyingma ngöndro.” But within the Kagyu tradition, there are many classifications and lineages, and each of these lineages has its own general and specific ngöndros. For example, there is the general ngöndro done in the Takpo Kagyu lineage, as well as specific ngöndros from the Vajrayogini and Chakrasamvara cycles of that lineage.

So, even though we’ve gotten used to it, it is never right to just say “Kagyu ngöndro.” If you were to say this to traditional teachers, they would be confused and ask, “Which Kagyu ngöndro?” Then *you* would be confused, because you didn’t know there was more than one. In learning about ngöndro, these are important things to know.

It is also important to know *which* ngöndro you are doing. [Rinpoche laughs.] Some of you do practices without even knowing their names. For example, the “Kagyu ngöndro” that some of you have happens to be the general ngöndro of Takpo Kagyu lineage.

A “general” ngöndro is so-called because the preliminaries are not done just once in your life. The general ngöndro is done to prepare your body, speech, and mind to become a suitable vessel for the vajrayana teachings. Those of you doing a general ngöndro would then receive transmissions for the *sampannakrama* and *utpattikrama* practices: the Rigdzin Thugthig, for example; or Vajrayogini; or Thugje Chenpo, the Great Compassionate One. Since each of these cycles of teachings has its own ngöndro, there isn’t actually time to do much else in life. [Rinpoche laughs.] That’s how you should see it!

As with each major school or lineage, there are many Nyingma ngöndros, both general and specific: for example, the Dudjom Tersar Ngöndro and the core Nyingma preliminaries known as *Nyingthik* ngöndro: the quintessence of the mahasandhi practices.

The ngöndro we are studying and practicing here is the Ati Zabdon ngöndro. Ati Zabdon is the profound essence of Ati Yoga, and the foundation ngöndro for all practitioners wishing to engage in the realization of the dzogchen transmissions. Its main deity is Vajrasattva, which is commonly the yidam practice of this sangha.

Of course, if you prefer a different ngöndro, that's fine. The structure of these ngöndros is always the same. And these particular teachings are applicable to all the various ngöndros: Ati Zabdon, Kagyu, Longchen Nyinthig, and so on. Since the view is similar, the only differences would be in the wording of the liturgies and the visualization of the central figure. So if you have been doing a particular ngöndro, don't change. If you haven't started ngöndro, you have a choice—but don't change halfway through or let an emotional mind make your decision.

What must permeate *any* ngöndro practice is the essence.

The Five Ngöndro Practices

In essence, the five practices known as ngöndro, or preliminaries, are as follows: (1) being able to surrender to the qualities of the Three Jewels; (2) generation of the pristine bodhichitta that gives direction to your path of practice; (3) understanding the importance of recognizing your inherent Buddha nature; (4) being able to truly manifest nonattachment to self and phenomena; and (5) absolute confidence in the “nature as is.” These are the essential aspects of the five preliminary practices:

(1-2) Taking refuge and generating bodhichitta are the first and second ngöndro practices, done together with prostrations. But beyond just “taking refuge” or “doing prostrations,” we are talking about actually recognizing and filling the mind with the pure qualities of the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. The bodhichitta practice then gives direction to the path of practice.

(3) Vajrasattva practice is all about gaining confidence in one's basic goodness, or Buddha nature. Without recognizing the inherent Buddha nature, there is no purpose to the path of Buddhist practices at all. When confidence in the Buddha nature arises, then...

(4) Mandala is a way to test and challenge yourself. Just how much freedom from grasping to phenomena and self have you truly accomplished?

(5) Guru yoga, ultimately, is about being so certain of the “nature as is” that you no longer rely on any references. You are established in the confidence of knowing that all phenomena are nothing other than projections of your mind. This takes you into the essence of the vajrayana creation stage: the *kyerim*, or *utpatti*, practices.

In this way, the preliminaries should be seen as giving direction to your path of practice—a path grounded on the two essential qualities of devotion and bodhichitta.

Two Essential Qualities: Devotion and Bodhichitta

*Where there is devotion, there is enlightenment.
Where there is no devotion, there is no enlightenment.
It's as simple as that.*

[Before receiving transmission for any ngöndro and entering the path of the practices, a vajrayana practitioner must generate two essential qualities.] The first is the generation of devotion. All of us have benefitted so much from the teachings arising from the kindness and wisdom of the Buddha, and from the various lineage masters visualized in front of us. In the Ati Zabdon ngöndro, visualize the presence of all these gurus embodied in the single essence of Vajrasattva and generate strong devotion.

Devotion is best expressed in the form of a homage; and a homage is best expressed as the strong determination to truly work with one's own mind to transform this precious human existence into a vehicle of liberation from delusion for oneself and others.

Through that devotion, generate the second essential quality, which is bodhichitta: the strong intention to make every effort on the path of realization to be for the single purpose of liberating all sentient beings from suffering.

In this way generate the two essential qualities of devotion and bodhichitta.

THE VAJRAYANA PATH

Now, although the most important aspect of any practice is the essence, nevertheless there is much to learn and understand about ngöndro—even *why* we do it. There are also many details, especially as we go through the commentary.

There are short, medium, and longer commentaries on the Ati Zabdon ngöndro by Terdag Lingpa and Lochen Dharmashri. This particular one is of middling length and contains many of the details of the lengthier texts. Without going into all the details, we cannot *not* mention some of them.

Sometimes you all become very tired of the details. But details are important, especially as a generation of future teachers is coming up. If no one else knows the details, at least they must know them. Otherwise, you will begin to modify, or “water down,” the classical texts. And that should not happen.

On the other hand, many of you begin ngöndro with great inspiration—and many of you have done very well. But, in many cases that inspiration *does* hit a wall. This wall, or impediment, seems to be hit when you encounter the details of the practices. There are so many things to visualize, so many ways to think. And then there is the western culture, which tends to relate to dharma instructions like a kind of manual, which is a very wrong approach.

The details of the practices should not be seen as technical tools for methodically building some sort of structure. It is not about building; instead, try to relate to the practices as the creation of a beautiful garden.

Like a Beautiful Garden...

If you want to create a beautiful garden, you can't become too technical about it. Some people design gardens that look terrible. Why? Because they're too meticulous and precise about everything; every suggestion—three flowers, four flowers, one shrub—is taken very literally. But no matter how hard they try, their gardens never give a sense of having the freedom to grow or blossom on their own.

Details are important; but always look at everything as a beautiful garden with its own natural growth. This way you see many details collectively. There's a difference between seeing things collectively and being so meticulous about details that you can't see the whole. If you just look at a flower here, a shrub there, you will never see fullness of a beautiful garden.

In the same way, there are many details to learn and understand when you study the dharma. The precision of the details is important. But when you take that information into meditation, do it more pervasively and allow for the fullness of growth in the sphere of your mind. A whole mind is like a beautiful garden.

You Can Do This

Your mind's ability to hold a vast number of details is naturally ingrained. In the dining pavilion, for example, you all eat your meals without missing a beat about who's coming and going, what they're eating, and whether or not you should have gotten that. You listen to people, make polite conversation, and respond to questions—all the while, liking and disliking, planning, and wondering. Your senses are *used* to taking in hundreds of things at the same time. When you get bogged down in details, think of this analogy.

You can do this. One mantra, one visualization, some lights going in or out—these are simple things. The rest is just resistance. Your ngöndro practice isn't a unique experience; you are just replacing what you usually do with something you are not used to doing. Instead of being discouraged, try to see the wholeness of the practice.

With the attitude of studying, learning, and practicing carefully, retain your enthusiasm and bring a mind like a beautiful garden to the practices of ngöndro.

Not Being Deterred

Modern meditators seem to imagine they can bring fruition to the path of the Buddhist teachings through intellect alone. Then come the practices of vajrayana!

During the preliminary practices, one often encounters certain obstacles to dedicating oneself to the practices fully. And those are the *best* times to look into yourself and see how far you have actually come with the mahayana view.

What you may see is, on one hand, a very big head filled with information about the emptiness of self and phenomena. On the other hand, you're having difficulty doing the few

prostrations you've "contracted" to do each day. Fifty becomes a terrible number, 100 is worse; and 100,000 is definitely something you don't want to do. And you wonder: What is my connection with all those people on the lineage tree? Is there really a Vajrasattva that helps us? What's the point of this mandala practice? Why not just sit and watch the nature of my mind?

These are just a few examples. Those of you doing the practices know that each one of you could come up with many more reasons, excuses, doubts and hesitations, questions and answers.

But when an obscuration comes up, this, itself, is the meeting ground. This is where you ask yourself, "Where am I hitting resistance, and what does it mean?"

From the mahayana perspective, there is no "I"—and so this I has no problems, I has no selfishness, I has no body to be so possessive about, and I has no mind or feelings.

And what about the nature of feelings? Are my feelings about ngöndro practice any different than all the feelings described by Chandrakirti, Nagarjuna, Shantideva, or any of the great bodhisattvas as being empty in nature? We fool ourselves by thinking: Yes, all those feelings are empty, but not the feeling I'm having right now. And those feelings of goodness that I can't evoke, and the difficult feelings I can't overcome—those feelings are different.

This is the way you see your mind's perceptions and projections. And this is way you articulate concepts in the sphere of appearances, sounds, and thoughts.

*There is just one explanation for obscurations:
you are actually in no hurry to attain enlightenment.
It all comes down to that.*

In the ngöndro practices, 100,000 is a good number because it is a difficult number. That difficult number can completely go through all hidden crevices of your mind's unique forms of resistance to transformation and transcendence. It gives momentum to the investigation of your own mind, which comes to a point where what it sees is not very nice.

What you see are such good qualities and so much aspiration—and such reluctance to actualization. There is just one explanation for this: you are actually in no hurry to attain enlightenment. It all comes down to that.

You start out with a very good opinion of yourself: "How could anyone *not* want liberation from suffering for all sentient beings? But if your aspirations were immediately apparent in postmeditation, your subtle reluctance would be very apparent to others, and you would be very embarrassed. The good thing about practices like the Seven Branch Prayer, or ngöndro, or creation and completion is that they are individual practices. So you don't have to embarrass yourself in front of others; you only embarrass yourself. That's why we sometimes feel bad in our practices.

Longchen Rabjam says it very beautifully using the analogy of the onion. You peel away one skin thinking, “OK, there’s naked awareness under this.” But there’s another skin under that, and another, and another. There is no end to the layers of “skins,” which are our habitual patterns. You’re amazed by the intricacies, the thickness, and stickiness of these layers. You see that anger is not just one thing; it’s layer upon layer of subtle aggression, subtle hatred, subtle jealousy, and subtle self-cherishing—and suddenly the word “defilement” comes alive.

You begin to understand that “lifetimes” refers not just to the life and death of the physical body, but to the millions and billions of lifetimes of obscurations repeated over and over. Then you see that 100,000 un-peelings are just the top layer—and you get just a taste of what it means to tame the mind.

Being Your Own Guide and Teacher

With a more mature understanding of the thickness and complexity of obscurations, any simplistic or childish sense of them falls apart; and any simplistic or childish understanding of what it means to tame or transcend the mind falls apart. You see that taming and training the mind is not that easy. The familiar repetition of giving in to and sustaining deluded concepts does not erode that easily—which is what must happen for the inherent nature to manifest.

As the great teachers have said: When the whole body is full of poison, the amount of medicine used to treat one finger—while it may be good medicine—will not be powerful enough to antidote that amount of poison. Likewise, to erode lifetimes of strong, sticky familiarization with obscurations, the little form or formless practices you like to do, the little bits of dharma you like to read, the little bits of sitting or whatever other sweet little practices you all like to do—while all very fine—will not be powerful enough to erode that amount of obscurations.

A vajrayana meditator must have a more mature perspective, and see the issues of samsara and nirvana more directly and courageously. Just as a child grows up to be independent, a practitioner grows up and gains the maturity to examine and see such things very clearly.

And then, as is said, you must “tie the nose-rope” to your own head. The analogy of an animal tying its own lead-rope refers to a mature practitioner who is not led on by anyone or anything else: not by theories, not by anyone else on the path. You actually take hold of the rope yourself and exercise your freedom by being your own guide and teacher.

At this point, however, being your own guide and teacher *does* require support. Submerged as you are in layers of familiar habitual patterns and delusions, the supports that keep you afloat are the practices: in particular, the refuge practice and generation of bodhichitta. And then there are the practices of actually building up confidence in one’s own nature, and of understanding the true nature of all phenomena and one’s self—and the practice of not being deterred by obscurations.

BEYOND THE MUNDANE MIND

It is very common, for western and eastern practitioners alike, to *think* we want to attain enlightenment and benefit sentient beings. But there is a tremendous difference between aspiration and actualization. We want to, we hope to, we wish to—but we may not actually have the courage to actualize our aspiration. Therefore the tendency is to take an intellectual approach to the teachings. The pitfall, then, is the tendency to come up with many impediments and obstacles to the path of practice.

Ego Will Never Say I'm Sorry

One very big obstacle on the path is imagining there is plenty of time to retain habitual patterns. Then certain seemingly intelligent ideas may be sustained—ideas that are actually very foolish because they arise from a neurotic mind. But we listen to these messages because they sound good. We may put off practicing because we're "not ready." Now, from all appearances, that sounds very sensible. There are many instances in the mundane world where this would be taught: a simple logic like "Don't cook until you know how." So you apply that samsaric logic to the path of practice. You think that you shouldn't begin something unless you know everything about it, or until you really feel ready. You think, "That's just being honest with yourself."

Now, is ego ever going to be honest with itself or say, "Look, I'm *really* sorry I've been so negative my whole life, I'll never get it, it's time to give me up"? We would like ego to come up that kind of honesty, but it's not going to happen. Instead ego is going to continue to promote the message of mundane-ness and sustain mundane ideas and samsaric tendencies, so that its survival is completely secured.

It is essential, therefore, to reflect on the passage of time.

Over the years, many of you have done exceptionally well. You have been walking the path as dedicatedly as anyone possibly could, with sincerity, diligence, and exertion; and you have maintained a kind of continuum of stability, which is very excellent. But there are also people with tremendous potential and qualities, people with clear sharp minds and good kind hearts—which is exceptionally important; people who are generous, skilled, and able to pick up things well; who have real inspiration and devotion to the path—until they encounter the indulgences of mundane mind.

There may only be one or two weaknesses. Some of you dwell on a single thought for a very long time. Or, you are just unable to get beyond some quagmire you've created for yourself, whether it's being so busy with your life, or so attracted to certain ambitions, or simply unable to cut through certain habitual patterns.

For three to five years, such occurrences may be fine. But when someone has not progressed on the path as they could have, as they *should* have, after struggling with the same things for ten or fifteen years or more—that is very worrisome. It leads us to know that you are

sustaining everything on theory. You may be feeling good, fulfilled, useful, dharmic, and able to incorporate dharma into your life as an expression of devotion, love, and gratitude. But your physical body may simply be holding onto words, and agreeing with those words, and nothing beyond that.

As practitioners who have been so fortunate to receive teachings from many different teachers over a period of time, it is essential to come to a point of understanding the importance of *transcending*. To go beyond theorizing and intellectualizing the teachings, you must incorporate all those words into your own practice. And for this, it is essential to enter the vajrayana path.

Vajrayana Is Not Difficult...

*Vajrayana is not difficult, but we make it difficult.
When you examine this particular difficulty, you see that the only
point of resistance is in actualizing what you thought was your motivation.*

Vajrayana is not difficult, but we make it difficult. Much of the difficulty is sparked by the “rumors” of those people who struggle with what—when you examine it—comes down to just one point. That one point is resistance to actualizing what you *thought* was your motivation. And of course that is difficult. Because at some point, the dharma must be powerful enough to completely sever all familiarities: familiar attachments, habitual ways of thinking, and the familiar ways you color those projected thoughts. It means your familiar ways of articulating labels, and your ways of defining, characterizing, and exaggerating concepts. These are *extremely* difficult things to let go of.

On the one hand, you do understand being kind, being selfless, and being able to rest in the nature of mind—all of these things are good. But you don’t actually see that in order to *be* kind, to practice selflessness, or to rest in your own true nature, simultaneously there must be a giving up of that familiar way you think; the way you articulate; the way you designate or label thoughts; and the way you allow the characteristics of a concept to proliferate.

When we begin to sense what this giving up actually entails, fear sets in. Reluctance sets in. Discouragement sets in. All the habitual neuroses kick up a big fight. They join forces and come up with all kinds of ideas. Some of these ideas place blame on the outside: these practices don’t make sense; they are very traditional, very dated. I don’t feel connected. Why would anyone do this?

Some good Buddhists resist putting blame on “other,” so you blame yourself: you’re not adequate; the potential isn’t there; you have so much work to do on yourself and you don’t have the time. All sorts of good-sounding ideas will come up—meanwhile, the ground you’re walking on is continuously shifting. It is a continuous, impermanent flow. Time passes—yet the repetition of the same habits goes on.

A practitioner must see this shifting ground and passage of time. In everything you do, sense this passage of time. Everything is moving; life is moving. You’ve been with the dharma ten,

twenty, thirty years—that’s a long time, more than half of your life. For some of us, much of our life has moved on. Yet still you sustain a sense of discouragement or doubt or hesitation, or you nurture some impediment—which is nothing but a concept, but you allow this concept to become so very strong. Meanwhile time passes.

And what are you left with? A very big head, as we say in Tibetan—filled with lots of theories, lots of profound words and understanding of the view—but somehow, a head that seems severed from the body. When the head is not attached to the body, there is no life in it. Likewise, there will not be enough power in your profound knowledge of dharma to do the necessary job of completely uprooting the basic tendencies of ignorance.

A meditator who is satisfied with theory alone is like someone who holds onto the seed of a fruit tree, visualizing the tree it could become in the future. But will you be absolutely satisfied with the taste of visualized fruit—while others plant trees and produce fruit that can actually satisfy not only their own hunger, but the hunger of others? If you truly think you will be content with a seed and some theory about its potential, while others have an actual tree and fruit that satisfies hunger and taste—that’s your choice.

Ultimately, in the nature of mind, yes, even the tree is illusory. If you have truly realized the mahayana and madhyamika teachings to such a degree that all appearances, sounds, and thoughts are truly seen as illusory in nature—that’s fine. One can’t argue with that. But in that case, you shouldn’t have any of the dualistic tendencies of ordinary life. There should be no hope, no fear, and no clinging even to the need for a seed.

But you can’t be clinging to a seed, and pretend the fruit doesn’t matter. From that perspective it is essential to understand that, yes, all these aspects and details of vajrayana—especially when we talk about ngöndro—are difficult. But what is not difficult in life? Everything is difficult. The mess we’ve created in life is very difficult. Therefore the broom that sweeps up that mess must, of course, be very powerful.

Therefore it is necessary to understand ngöndro correctly, and to work to realize the mahayana view.

Cultivating the Vajrayana Spirit

All of you who have begun to understand vajrayana must try to *be* vajrayanists. Otherwise, you cannot study, understand, and benefit from the vajrayana teachings.

To being a vajrayanist means that you cannot approach the path of practice with mentality of someone who is constantly meek. Meekness should be most prevalent when you’re about to do something horribly negative. You’re about to get angry, or you’re about to demonstrate your arrogance, or you’re about to get terribly jealous—that’s the time to be meek. Otherwise, meekness is not good.

Instead, be brave. Be courageous. Even when you don’t feel courageous, always remember to trust the blessings and the power of the aspirations from which these teachings have evolved and been given to you.

Sometimes it is good to work with your own mind's ability; but sometimes it is better to trust the courage of the gurus and bodhisattvas. When we read the aspiration chants, for example, in my own mind I always think: More than whatever I could possibly think of, may that be the better aspiration. In this way, I put more trust in the words of the bodhisattvas. It is their words of aspiration that form the basis of my courage. And it is their aspirations that actually hook my meek mind and make it more flexible, more open, and vast.

Train yourself to think in this way, and allow the rigidity and tightness of your hesitation to be taken care of by the words of the bodhisattvas. Allow their words to nourish and protect you, and assist you to open up your mind. By skillfully going beyond doubts and hesitation, you will truly be able to “merge your mind with the mind of the Buddha,” as is said in the vajrayana teachings.

This is what it means to “cultivate the vajrayana spirit.” It is a mind vast enough to take in a sense of all things being possible: being open is possible; being flexible is possible; letting go is possible. Having nothing but awareness is possible—and giving yourself every opportunity to merge your mind with that possibility is essential.

When Something Really Matters...

Truthfully speaking, it is understandable that many of the transmissions and teachings you take won't all be put into practice. You will try, but the mind is very tricky. There are always changes of mind; and the repetitiveness of habitual patterns; and the time it takes for the teachings to be fully incorporated and engaged in. You may make a commitment to do certain things, such as ngöndro, which is good. And it's quite all right to aspire to incorporate other transmissions and teachings in the future. You have to keep that aspiration in mind.

However, when you do them in the future, it is also quite possible there may not be a teacher. There may not be a text or an explanation. This may or may not be the case. So with that in mind, if there is something that would be useful to learn or practice in the future—even if you're not doing ngöndro at this time—you should not hesitate to learn about it and keep the aspiration to incorporate it into your practice.

When something really matters to us, like falling in love, you have lots of time to give to it. You sleep less. You make yourself available. You give up other situations, without it being a sacrifice. And you never say, “I don't have time for this.” Which confirms the suspicion that you actually do have time—but Dharma is not the priority.

Where Dharma is not the priority, it comes back to not understanding the value of Dharma. The antidote to that is to really learn the qualities of the dharma. And then it is absolutely important to truly take refuge in the Dharma and generate devotion to the dharma. The mind will then open up and the vastness of the entire view of dharma can be contained.

It Comes Back to This

When, through the stages of ngöndro, you yourself come up with confidence in your Buddha nature, from that moment on you are no longer reliant upon any method, practice, or meditation. But as long as some obscurations are more powerful than your confidence in

your Buddha nature, you will always have someone to prostrate to, something to purify, and something to obtain.

How long will you be in need of more blessings before having more confidence in your Buddha nature? I leave that up to you. How many more purifications will you have to do before confidence in your primordially enlightened mind—which needs no contribution from you—arises? Until then, you will be reliant on the practice of purification.

If, as of today, you can rest and relax without obscurations, you are done with ngöndro. But if the belief in your obscurations is stronger than your belief in the nature of your mind, then 100,000 of each practice is what you start with. You'll have 100,000 moments to think about it. Ultimately, it comes back to this.

Guru Yoga is the supposed to be the last ngöndro practice. But what does it mean to dissolve the guru's mind—Vajrasattva's mind, the mind of the Buddha—into your own mind? It means is that they are, by nature, indistinct. If you can truly rest with confidence in that, then you can also truly meet all appearances as mere projections of your mind.

Until then you, yourself, are deciding that there are impediments stronger than your Buddha nature and impurities that need more purification. Because you feel inadequate, you need to prostrate to those superior to you. Because you think you're submerged in impurities, you have a Vajrasattva practice to do. Because you feel incapable of being nothing but bodhichitta, you have a bodhichitta practice to recite. Because you think all the skandhas and elements are distinct from you, you will actually give away mandalas. And you will keep putting yourself into the guru and the guru into yourself, until you come to the point of knowing either you are two or you are one.

If you are two, go back to the refuge and, again, place the guru on the lineage tree. If you truly see your mind and the guru's mind as indistinct, then your ngöndro practice is complete.

This is the way to look at ngöndro from an essential perspective. Those of you who have confidence in your Buddha nature and can rest in that don't need to come back for the next session. [Laughter.] That would be best. That's the way it should be.

These are some things to keep in mind, especially as you begin to enter into the vajrayana practices.



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