

Dzogchen View of Ngöndro **His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche**

Whatever practice we engage in, relative truth and absolute truth are co-existent; method and wisdom are co-existent; experiences and emptiness are co-existent. This is because such is the nature of reality. The foundational practices of *ngöndro* exist as a method for realising the nature of reality which is a beginningless enlightened state. The final phase of *ngöndro*, guru yoga, is the quintessence of this method. Through guru this level of wisdom is reached when the guru dissolves and becomes one with you. At that point, you remain in the absolute nature of things, which is the actual state of reality *as it is*.

At the beginning, we invoke the presence of the guru. Since the guru is the one who exemplifies both the qualities of the path and the qualities of the goal, we acknowledge the guru at the beginning and end of this practice.

Having acknowledged the guru, we consider the difficulty of gaining the human form which is the most conducive circumstance for spiritual practice. The human form is the basis of the spiritual path of liberation and is therefore precious and worthy of great respect. If you do not value this situation in which you now find yourself, you will not make use of it, and a great opportunity will be squandered.

Then we consider impermanence and death. Everything that exists is subject to change and dissolution. Even though you die, you will not find freedom simply by losing your physical form. You will just continue circling in samsara, taking on countless forms according to your patterned perception. The nature of samsara is the experience of suffering which arises through attempting to maintain the illusion of duality. We contemplate upon that.

Then we reflect upon conditioning and the patterns of karmic experiences. We recognise the manner in which our perception and responses are all governed by dualistic conditioning which is so difficult to undermine.

These are called The Four Thoughts which Turn the Mind. Their purpose is to shift our attention away from compulsive patterning and re-patterning. It is important to contemplate these Thoughts at the beginning of *ngöndro* in order to generate the appropriate motivation for practice. Practising in this way is like smoothing out a ploughed field to make it even and ready for sowing. Then we need to sow the seed itself. To sow the seed is to take refuge, generate bodhicitta, offer mandalas, and purify ourselves through Vajrasatva.

From the perspective of the relative condition in which we find ourselves, it is not possible to realise the absolute nature of reality without relating to what is relative. Without using your relative situation as a basis, you cannot realise the true nature of your mind. In the same way, without *ngondro*, you cannot directly apprehend the nature of emptiness. The relative and absolute co-exist —they go hand in hand; it is really very important to realise this.

Let us now look at refuge. At the external level there are the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Buddha is the source of Dharma. Those whose minds are turned towards Dharma are Sangha. Since we exist in duality, we experience delusory dissatisfaction. It is because of this that we take refuge in order to be freed from the experiences of self-generated dissatisfaction. Due to mis-apprehending our true nature, this human form becomes the container of endless dualistic projections. It becomes a source of attachment. This attachment is very strong until you see the true nature of existence. Until you are completely freed from the delusion that your body validates your existence, dissatisfaction will continually colour your experience. Because of this, the Three Jewels exist as the focus of refuge. So, externally speaking, one takes refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha with devotion, but internally, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are symbolic—a profound and skilful way which leads us out of self-created illusory samsara.

From the Dzogchen point of view, the Three Jewels are within us. On the absolute level, this mind of ours, which is empty of all referential co-ordinates, is in itself Buddha, *rigpa*, radiant self-luminosity. Externally, Dharma manifests as sound and meaning—you hear it and you practise it. But from an internal point of view, Dharma is empty. In essence, it is the unceasing, unobstructed, self-luminous display of *rigpa*—primordial mind. Externally, Sangha comprises those whose minds turn towards Dharma, but internally, Sangha is the all-pervasive all-encompassing aspect of mind. The Three Jewels are all fully accomplished within us. However, since we do not recognise this, we take refuge in their external aspects. When you practise *ngöndro*, you visualise Padmasambhava with fervent devotion; you perform prostrations in humility with your body; and you recite the refuge verse with your speech. Then, when you sit silently at the end of your practice, you dissolve the visualisation into yourself and you come to realise that these three—subject, object and activity—are none other than *rigpa*! The meditator is oneself; Padmasambhava is one's own object of mediation. Just remain in the nature of *rigpa*. Other than *rigpa*, there is nothing to find! Shakyamuni Buddha said in the *Do-de Kalpa Zangpo*, *I manifested in a dreamlike way to dreamlike beings and gave a dreamlike Dharma, but in reality I never taught and never actually came*. From this viewpoint, all is mere perception, existing only in the apparent sphere of suchness. As regards the practice of refuge, the relative aspect is the object of refuge to which you offer devotion and prostrations and so on. But the absolute aspect is without effort; it is when you

dissolve the visualisation and remain in the natural effortless state of mind in which the concept of refuge no longer exists.

The generation of *bodhicitta* or the enlightened thought means that if we just act for ourselves alone, we are not following the path of Dharma and our enlightenment will be blocked. It is of the utmost importance that we generate the enlightened thought of freeing all beings from samsara. Beings are as limitless as the sky. They have all been our fathers and mothers. They have all suffered in the samsara that is artificially fabricated from the ground of being. So the thought of freeing them from this suffering really is very powerful. Without it, we have only the deluded concept that we are separate from all sentient beings. The enlightened thought is: *From now until samsara is empty, I shall work for the benefit of all beings who have been my fathers and mothers.* So from the relative point of view, there are sentient beings to be liberated, there is compassion to be generated, and there is an 'I' which is the generator of compassion. The way of generating and showing compassion was explained by Shakyamuni Buddha himself. Such is the relative thought of enlightenment.

In the relative practice of the thought of enlightenment, you visualise all beings and then you arouse the enlightened thought. You recite the verse as many times as your practice requires. The instruction according to the teachings on the development of the enlightened thought, is that you exchange your own happiness for the pain of others. As you breathe out, you give all your happiness and joy, and even their causes, to all sentient beings. As you breathe in, you take on all their pain and suffering so that they can be free of it. This is also very important. Without the development of the enlightened thought, we cannot free ourselves from our attachment to the forms and displays of emptiness, and so we cannot attain enlightenment. It is because of our inability to show compassion to others and because of being attached to the concept of ourselves that we are not yet free of dualism. All these things are the relative aspects of the practice of the enlightened thought.

As regards the absolute aspect of the enlightened thought, Shakyamuni Buddha said to his disciple Rabjor, *All phenomena are like an illusion and a dream.* The reason why the Buddha said this is that whatever manifests is subject to change and dissolution; nothing is inherently solid, permanent, separate, continuous, or defined. If you see the world as solid, you tie yourself up with a rope of entanglement and are constrained and pulled by compulsion as a dog is by a leash. You get drawn into activities that can never be finished, which is why samsara is apparently endless.

You might think that because samsara is like a dream, perhaps enlightenment is solid and permanent. But Shakyamuni Buddha said that nirvana itself is also like a dream—an illusion. There is nothing that can be named which is nirvana; there is nothing called nirvana which is tangible. Shakyamuni Buddha said this directly, *Form is emptiness.* For

instance, the moon can be reflected in water, but there is no moon in the water and there never has been. There is no moon in the water which can be grasped. The form is empty. Then Shakyamuni Buddha went on to say: *Emptiness itself is form*. It is emptiness itself which has appeared in the manner of form. You cannot find emptiness apart from form. You cannot separate the two. You cannot grasp them as separate entities. The moon is reflected in water, but the water is not the moon. The moon is not the water, yet you cannot separate the water and the moon. Once you have understood this at the level of experience, there is no more samsara. In the realm of realisation, there is no samsara or nirvana. When speaking of the teachings of Dzogchen, samsara and nirvana are just another dualistic concept. But when looking at the moon in water, you may say: *But it is there, I can see it!* But when you reach for it and try to touch it, it is not there! It is the same with the thoughts that arise in your mind. So if you ask, *How has this come about?* you need to know that everything comes about through interdependent origination. What is interdependent origination? It is simply that the moon and water do not exist separately. The clear water is the primary cause, and the moon is the secondary or contributory cause. When these two meet, interdependent origination manifests. It is the coincidental appearance of the primary cause and the contributory cause.

To put it directly, the primary cause or basis of samsara is duality—the artificial separation of emptiness and form. From this, all manifestations become contributory causes within the framework of karmic vision. As long as we attach to the form display of emptiness as a definition of being, they meet together and bring about the manifestation of samsara. Everything that we experience as samsara exists only within interdependence. You must be quite sure of this! When you go further and examine the nature of interdependent origination, you find that it is none other than emptiness. Therefore, apart from emptiness, there are no phenomena or *dharmas*. The ultimate view of mahayana is emptiness, but this viewpoint does not exist in the lower teachings.

If you really look into your experience of existence with the eye of meditation, you begin to see everything as the play of emptiness. Phenomena as referential co-ordinates become exhausted and you finally arrive at their essential nature, which is emptiness. But, having said this, you might be led to say, *In that case, we do not need to do anything*. But whether you need to do anything or not, it's up to you. It simply depends on your mind! Just dryly talking of emptiness is not enough! You must actualise it and see for yourself. If your mind is really empty of referential manipulation, then there is no hope, no fear, no negativity—your mind is free of that! It is like waving your hand in the sky! Whatever arises is completely unobstructed. The purpose of meditation is to remain in this natural state. In that state all phenomena are directly realised in their essential emptiness. That is why we practise meditation. Meditation purifies everything into its empty nature. First we must realise that the absolute, natural state of things is empty. Then, whatever manifests is the play of dharmakaya. Out of the empty nature of

existence arise all the relative manifestations from which we fabricate samsara. You need to understand quite clearly how things are in reality and how they appear in terms of duality. It is very important to have this View, because without View, your meditation becomes dull. Just simply sitting and saying, *It's all empty*, is like putting a little cup upside-down—that little empty space in the cup remains a very narrow, limited emptiness. You cannot even drink tea from it!

It is essential to actually know the heart of the matter as it is. In the absolute sense, there are no sentient beings who experience dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction is as empty as the clear sky, but because of attachment to the form displays of emptiness through interdependent origination, the relative sphere of things becomes an illusory trap in which there are sentient beings who do experience dissatisfaction. This is the meaning of samsara.

In expressing the essential quality of the Great Mother, emptiness, it is said, *Though you want to express the nature of the Heart Sutra, you cannot put it into words*. It is totally beyond utterance, beyond thought, beyond concept. It was never born. It has never died. If you ask, *what it is like*. *It is like the sky*. You can never find the limit of the sky. You can never find the centre of the sky. So this sky-like nature is symbolic of emptiness: it is spacious, limitless, and free, with infinite depth and infinite expanse. But having said this, you might say, *So my own rigpa, the nature of my own mind, is like the sky, free from all limitations*. But this is not it either! It is not *just* empty. If you look into it there *is* something to *see*. 'See' is just a word we have to use in order to communicate. But you can *see* that. You can meditate on that. You can rest in whatever arises in that spacious condition. If you see the true nature of emptiness and form as non-dual—*as it really is*—this is the mother of all buddhas. All this chatter has been an elaboration of the absolute thought of enlightenment, bodhicitta.

Next is the purification through Vajrasatva. In the absolute sense, there is nothing to purify, no one who can purify you, and no purification. But since we are apparently unable to leave it at that, matters become a little bit more complicated. Obscurations and dualistic confusions arise as the consequence of our clinging to the form displays of emptiness. In the illusory perception of this grasping at the form displays of emptiness, we subject ourselves to endless dissatisfaction. Because of this, purification is needed as a relative skilful means. In order to purify our delusions, Vajrasatva, Father & Mother, arises from your own true state of *rigpa*, and the flow of nectar from the secret mandala of their union, completely purifies your obscurations. You enter into this envisionment and recite the hundred-syllable mantra. This is the means of purification. But still, in the natural state of things, in the state of what is, everything is pure from the very beginning—like the sky. This is the absolute purification of Vajrasatva.

Now we come to the mandala or cosmogramme offering. Mandalas are offered for the accumulation of auspicious causes. Why do we need to accumulate auspicious causes? It is because of our grasping to the form displays of emptiness that illusory samsara has come about; so we need to practise giving up all these form displays. Since there is the illusion that there is a way of purifying illusion, we can utilise this practice as a relative skilful means. Because you can purify, this is also a way of accumulating auspicious causes. When you offer *your body, possessions and glories*, this is the relative, symbolic mandala offering. From the absolute point of view, these things are empty, like the clear empty sky. So when you remain in the state of primordial awareness, that is the absolute mandala offering and the absolute accumulation of auspicious causes.

Then there is the practice of guru yoga. Due to our clinging to the form displays of emptiness, the guru appears as the one who inspires purity of mind. He or she is the object towards whom one feels purely. Because clinging obscures the mind and because you feel purity of perception toward the guru, both you and the guru appear to exist in the sphere of dualism, as if the fundamental nature of your minds, within the sphere of dharmakaya, were different. Therefore, externally, you visualise the guru with great devotion. Then you receive the empowerment of his or her non-dual condition.

These are all the external, relative practices of guru yoga in which you have invoked the wisdom presence of the symbolic apparent guru. Then you recite the vajra words: *The guru dissolves into light and unites with my very being; see that the one taste of rigpa-emptiness is the actual face of the guru!*"

If you ask where the absolute guru is, he or she is nowhere else but there—in the absolute nature of your mind! The absolute state of *rigpa* is where the guru is fully accomplished as primordial wisdom and clear space. Simply continuing in the awareness of *how it is*, is the Dzogchen practice of guru yoga.

This is how the outer *ngöndro* relates to the inner *ngöndro* in terms of the teaching of ati-yoga.

Transcribed by Ngak'chang Rinpoche from oral teachings given by His Holiness Jig'dröl Yeshe Dorje Düd'jom Rinpoche, first Supreme Head of the Nyingma School in exile from Tibet; augmented by replies to questions asked by Ngak'chang Rinpoche in private audiences, relating to the short Düd'jom gTérsar ngöndro, Bodhanath, Kathmandu, Nepal, 1979. Slight grammatical edits made Lama Dechen Yeshe Wangmo 2009.