



MINDROLLING INTERNATIONAL

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Transcripts & Documents

This Precious Opportunity

This address was given by Her Eminence Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, on 31 December 2010, speaking by Skype from Samten Tse Retreat Centre, India, to participants in the 2nd of a series of Ngöndro Retreats at Lotus Garden retreat center.

Hello everyone. That is a very jam-packed room there. If anyone feels like being in a cave, there seems to be a vacant space in the fireplace. That might be more spacious [laughter].



I just returned late last night from Sikkim, where we were able to visit Pema Yangtse. This is the place founded by Jetsün Mingyur Paldrön when she escaped the Mongol invasion — which is how the Dzogchen teachings came to Sikkim. Several of us were able to go there, and we all got back late last night. Then, very early this very cold morning Jetsunla forced us out of bed and here we are. [Students: Thank you, Rinpoche.] Thank you, indeed! [Laughter]

I have been very, very happy since the last ngöndro retreat that happened at Lotus Garden, as well as in all the study groups for those who could not travel the distance. Just knowing that you are all dedicated and making the effort to spend this holiday season doing practice is really very heartwarming. And, I am not at all worried about the quality of practice and the teachings, because of the presence of wonderful lopöns. So this is a wonderful practice opportunity.

The First Thought Brings Joy

The ngöndro retreats that you've all been doing are founded on the first of the "four thoughts that turn the mind": the reminder of the preciousness of human existence. As you sit in meditation and practice, you are able to contemplate not only the difficulties on the path of realization, but also, the enormous opportunity and fortunate circumstances you enjoy. This is a time when you can dedicate yourself to the path of practice and also feel the joyfulness of realizing what a precious opportunity this is.

Joyfulness is what really fortifies dedication to the path of the practice. I sometimes think that practitioners don't generate enough joy. Of course, you are all *happy* at certain moments, but the joyfulness of deepened contentment must also be there.

This joyfulness is for no other reasons than just recognizing all the positive karma and merit you have accumulated in your life; the enormous love and support of family and friends; and then the exertion, diligence, and devotion that you, yourself, generate. Upon contemplation, those are the causes that should unfold a sense of deepened joyfulness that warms your heart.

When your heart is warm with joyfulness, you realize the rarity of this precious opportunity and human life. Otherwise, you could just list the eighteen reasons why this is called a "precious human existence." But that would be just one aspect of contemplation.

Besides just going through the list of endowments and freedoms—some of which you may agree with or doubt—first contemplate the quality of the life you *have*. Contemplate how you have allowed that quality to manifest in your life, through your own efforts and with the love and support of family, friends, teachers, and everyone you meet. Then you will really feel how lucky and fortunate you are.

Having understood the preciousness of your life, the importance of treasuring this opportunity arises naturally. And the other three contemplations—impermanence, karma, and the various aspects of suffering in samsara—naturally unfold from that first thought, the preciousness of human existence.

The Ember that Becomes a Fire

When you have something that is truly rare and precious, you want to treasure it. You want to keep it safe. You want to make sure that it's not broken or damaged or taken away from you. When you really treasure something, you want to make sure that you make the best use of it. And, of course, you don't want it to encounter difficulties.

In the same way, falling into the various realms of samsaric existence and not being able to free yourself from samsara's suffering would be a misuse of something rare and precious. Knowing the preciousness of human existence, you want to retain it and not waste it.

The subsequent three reminders—impermanence, karma, and samsaric suffering—naturally unfold with a *strengthened* contemplation of the precious human existence. Treasuring and valuing this precious life gives rise to contemplation of impermanence—and to not wanting to misuse this life, thus creating negative karma and becoming a source of suffering, when it could be a source of liberation for yourself and others.

Dedicating yourself to practicing well in retreat is one wonderful way to work with the first contemplation. The preciousness of human existence is something you have to understand and be proud of—not in an egoistic way, but in a way that warms your mind and your heart with joyfulness.

This is the ember that gradually becomes stronger and stronger, like a fire within you, as you recognize how all your qualities, merit, and positive karma can become a source of genuine happiness and goodness for yourself and others. This is very important to cultivate in your retreat practice.

What Not to Do in Retreat

Generally when people go into retreat, especially in the modern world, they tend to go to extremes. Some people see retreat as a way of imprisoning themselves in a very intensive situation, which is very wrong. You are not punishing yourself for being a Buddhist. Nor is retreat a cause for analyzing your *namtoks*, or discursive thoughts, so much that you beat yourself up and get much too harsh with yourself.

On the other hand, some people think retreat is the time and place to run completely wild with thoughts, doubts, and kleshas. That is also not right. Retreat is not the time for all kinds of discursiveness. We have enough klesha thoughts continuously coming up in our mundane world and activities, as it is. Retreat is not the time for that.

Retreat is your time to really settle down with devotion to your practice and free your mind from running wild. Instead of generating so many thoughts, now is the time to empty and calm your mind. You have removed your body from all the busyness and brought it to a much calmer, quieter place. You have distanced your speech from the many mundane kinds of busy talk. In the same way, you have to bring your mind to a much simpler, quieter, more harmonious place.

When the body, speech, and mind calm down and become quiet, you will be able—through contemplation—to bring fruition to what you have heard and learned.

Retreat Is of the Essence

The Buddhist teachings talk about “hearing, contemplating, and meditating.” Hearing and studying are what you have done and continue to do. Contemplating and meditating are what you emphasize in retreat.

Hearing and study happen when teachers come to teach and give empowerments, or during study groups and various teachings with the lopöns. That is when all the analysis and discussion of whether things are this way or that way should happen. That’s when you ask questions and get answers and then think about and examine those answers. What you bring into retreat is the essence of all of that.

Contemplating and meditating are the main aspects of retreat—not contemplating the kleshas, but contemplating the essence of the teachings. Allowing your mind to distance itself from everything you do in the mundane world, you settle down with the very quintessence of the teachings.

This requires devotion. And it requires a mind that recognizes the profoundness and preciousness of the opportunity to practice. This has to be thought about in such a way that you truly realize that practicing dharma in the mundane world is very difficult.

This is why teachers like Kyabje Rinpoche have emphasized retreat *so* much. By now, you should all understand the importance of this emphasis on retreat. And you should be aware that seeing the preciousness of human existence, and seeing the importance of practicing in retreat dedicatedly and wholeheartedly with your body, speech, and mind is essential if you want to get anywhere with your dharma practices.

Squeezing Meaning from Experience

Of course, it is always necessary to see the positive aspect of the normal rhythm of dharma practice as it happens in the world today. Otherwise people like us would have never gotten to this point. At the same time, you may be retaining that rhythm by simply approaching the teachings intellectually.

Knowing and hearing the teachings, agreeing with some and disagreeing with others, you become mentally satisfied with the intellectual substance you get. That being sufficient, you wait for the next moment to reconnect in that way. And you may do this for years and years, without ever giving yourself an opportunity to really squeeze the meaning from the teachings—as an experience—within your heart.

When the maturity of mind that recognizes the *meaning* of the teachings is neglected, what we have is an abundance of intellectuals who understand and appreciate buddhadharma, but who are not necessarily able to transform this human life into a vehicle of liberation for themselves and others.

When transformation doesn't happen, you may know a lot but you remain the same person, year after year. And looking back over this year, how many people have we lost? Many friends and family members have passed away. Many dharma practitioners have passed away—some of them having done very good practice. But if we look practically, we see how many people *knew* dharma, but never really practiced dharma to the point where we would have seen genuine realization.

It is important to think about this. You are all at a point where you realize the preciousness of this life. At the same time, it's like holding a precious jewel in your hand, knowing and appreciating its value, but not really using it to produce the result it's capable of.

So in retreat, allow that ember, that spark, to ignite in your mind and become stronger and stronger. And through the strength and power of that recognition, bring genuine fruition to the path of practice, by having a much more mature understanding of the Buddhist path of meditation in your life. That more "mature" understanding being nothing other than the realization that the dharma must bring about transformation of your attitude and conduct.

This is the whole purpose of dharma. What we are trying to do—through contemplating and meditating; through seeking the blessings of the guru, Buddha, dharma, sangha, and the lama, yidam, and khandro; through supplicating and prayers; through purifying unvirtuous karma and accumulating of merit—is to clean this mind, to purify this mind, so the mind goes from an impure to a pure state.

Nurturing the Spark of Ability

With the discipline of retreat, you “bind” your body, bind your speech, and bind your mind. You then nurture and take care of them through awareness of the Four Thoughts and through your devotion. What you are doing here is recognizing that you have within you the pure awareness to use all your diverse abilities—abilities of mind, abilities of speech, abilities of action—in a positive way.

Recognizing this gives you a mature, stark, and direct experience of seeing the difference between that which is negative and should be abandoned as aspects of ignorance and, on the other hand, the core pure nature of your mind. Sitting in meditation in retreat—because of all your previous contemplations and supports—you come face to face with that. Like seeing your face clearly in a clean mirror, you clearly see your own pure natural aspect *and* you see clearly the all veils, the layers and layers of negative aspects that you allow yourself to be pulled into.

In the Buddha’s teachings on the twelve nidanas, he talks about how formation takes place from ignorance. In meditation, without the intellectual analysis of the twelve nidanas, you experience that directly. That direct experience is very simple. You simply know what you should not have done and what you have allowed yourself to be pulled towards—all of which is on the wheel of formations.

Distraction is allowing yourself to be pulled towards whatever is *not* the pure aspect of your mind and leads to many kinds of formations—the single name of which is samsara. As a meditator, you sit in meditation and continuously look at that.

This is not a one-time experience or understanding. A one-time thing would only feed the intellectual mind. You would say, “Oh, yes, that’s how it is,” and maybe discuss it with a friend over coffee or tea. Some of you might even come up with, “Oh, yes, I must be careful not to let this happen.” But don’t do it that way; don’t simply feed your intellect.

Retain, instead, the experience of contrast between distraction and the pure aspect of your mind. And allow that to warm your mind, again and again.

Renouncing Distraction and Cultivating Revulsion

It is with this understanding that many of our masters, mahasiddhas, yogis, and great, great enlightened beings have sung *dohas* and written verses and texts about revulsion and renunciation. Not to teach people how to get *away* from something, rather as the constant realization, from their own meditation, of two things: our natural fundamental quality and the distraction that continuously pulls us away from it.

How important it is, therefore, to renounce these constant distractions. How important it is to cultivate revulsion to the momentum of causes they create: momentum that makes human beings endowed with Buddha nature become like machines, continuously churning out the causes of samsara, suffering, and further distraction.

As you sit in meditation, there has to be a yearning—not for throwing things away, or running from situations, or escaping from certain places—a yearning for the mind to become strong enough not to be constantly distracted or diverted into creating causes of samsara.

Now when you begin to have that yearning, what should you do about it? Western practitioners are all about action. If you have a yearning, you have to do something about it. The advice at this moment is practical advice. You cannot do much at this time. You have families waiting, you have responsibilities waiting, and you are not ready to jump into this. It is just a spark.

Rather than acting upon it *physically*, it is best to keep the yearning as a longing. Simply keep it in your mind. Long for it, long for it, long for it—and over time, that will build in your mind a natural sense of trust and confidence in the positive aspect of your mind. With this kind of longing, the power of aspiration will become more genuine, and the power of devotion to the path of practice will become more genuine.

In the future, the time may come when you are able to go away for longer periods. Then this yearning will become confidence. In the same way, sustaining some small amount of yearning for practice brought you into this retreat. This is what separated you from many others who also have longing and yearning, but may not be strong enough to weigh their decision in favor of being in retreat, over not being in retreat. In that sense, your longing may be better than many—but less strong than the yearning of others.

To have the strength of a Buddha's yearning or a bodhisattva's yearning for liberation, to a yearning for liberation like that of Padmasambhava or our gurus and great masters, you will have to nurture the small yearning you have in your mind. And that can only happen if you reflect, contemplate, and meditate, and see clearly and *experientially* the contrast between the pure, true nature of your mind—content, calm, and harmonious—and what it encounters in the mundane world, within the klesha-ridden mind.

Contemplating in this way is what separates an intellectual Buddhist mind from a practitioner's mind. But it cannot happen unless you allow yourself to be in retreat.

Otherwise, you may have great trust in a teacher, a teacher who talks about the importance of realizing the nature of mind and discerning between what to abandon and what to cultivate—and from an intellectual perspective, you agree. But that agreeing will not have the same kind of power as the power that comes from your seeing this directly within yourself.

This is why it is always said to be very important to make the effort to physically come and sit in retreat. And this is why the environment and structure created for a retreat, and the disciplines and samayas of retreat are all very important.

Now many people have been doing retreats in their homes or in small groups, which is also very good. And given a situation where it's difficult to do otherwise, I have allowed it. But in such short periods of retreat, it is difficult to come to a very powerful moment of experience. Moreover, I'm not sure how disciplined you can be doing retreats in your homes. And even if you are disciplined, what may happen at home is that you become overly deliberate in your meditation, or overly strict with yourself. By enforcing a strong deliberateness, you may try overly hard to compensate for whatever you think you're not able to do. All of which is very harmful for the meditation and practices.

When the contained environment of a retreat center is created, there are so many aspects to keep in mind—whether it's tightening certain things or relaxing certain things. You may not even realize the absolute skill of the lōpons and teachers and others who make it possible for you to do a retreat. The skill with which such a situation is made then triggers a powerful sort of energy that enables a meditator's mind to have fewer obstacles in reaching certain moments of realizing the deepened qualities of mind.

Therefore, with appreciation to all those who make retreats possible, realize the importance of engaging in retreat and how wonderful it is that you can be there.

One thing I am *not* happy about is the duration of the retreats. These few days you spend in practice hardly qualify to be called a retreat. Hopefully in the future, we can increase it a day at a time, by two days, three days, and so on. For now, one solution to not being able to get large amounts of time for retreat is to try to do retreats consistently. There would be some benefit in consistently doing shorter retreats.

Nothing Changes yet Everything Changes

The main intention of retreat is to “chew” on what you have experienced. And as I said earlier, this doesn’t mean experimenting with your klesha thoughts. That you can do after the retreat. During retreat, just chew on the essence and the meaning and the words of the dharma that you have heard—without much debate about those issues.

For example, if devotion comes up during retreat, you may think: What *kind* of devotion is this? Am I feeling it or not feeling it? What if I have no devotion? Is devotion really necessary?

That is not the issue. Devotion is devotion. Keep it very simple. Every other aspect of analysis should be done when you are hearing and studying the teachings. Retreat is the time for your mind to become simple. The simple mind just *knows*. It just cultivates a sense of genuine devotion. As our teachers used to say, you’ve lived this long—some of you sixty or seventy years—without generating much devotion. You could at least give it a try for two or three days.

Of course, some smart people may suddenly realize you don’t know what devotion is. So you look up it up in the dictionary. There are simple meanings given in the dictionary, without making it into an intellectual definition with all those characteristics that you’ve heard about in the teachings that you don’t remember.

Simply put, devotion is a heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for what you have, for those things you can’t deny. It is the gratitude you feel for the teachers, gratitude for all the goodness in your life, gratitude for all the hard work and effort that you, yourself, have put in. With that gratitude, allow yourself to generate devotion.

In the same way, keep very simple all the other aspects of dharma that you are meditating on. Allow the simple meaning to permeate your mind and remain calmly in that state. This is the best way to remain in retreat. Along with that, of course, combine whatever other practices you may be doing: taking refuge, generating bodhichitta, prostrating, doing Vajrasattva practice, mandala offerings, generating guru yoga, and so on.

But while doing that, generate the contentment, joyfulness, and warmth of knowing, “Here I am, a practitioner, with the opportunity to remain this close to my basic fundamental nature.” And mindfully and with awareness, free the mind from the distractions of mundane life and the formation of countless causes that, ignorantly, we are constantly distracted by.

Looking at it this way, you will find you are doing nothing other than renouncing samsara and permeating your mind with the essence of dharma. This is true revulsion. This is true renunciation. You have not run away from anything, and yet you have renounced everything. You have not physically given anything away, but there is a genuine essence of revulsion in your mind.

Nothing has changed and yet everything has changed. When you see this you long for more—and that, I hope, will become your inspiration to do more retreats. When you’re not able to be in retreat, at least be mindful of this in your daily life at home.

So now be happy, be cheerful. Always strengthen what you have realized during your retreat by being mindful of it. Practice well and don’t waste this life. You have received a great many teachings and empowerments. Now with a little exertion—and with love and dedication to the practice of dharma—bring full fruition to your life. Most importantly, bring about genuine transformation of your attitude and conduct. Many of you are doing very well in this regard. Now make it stronger and more powerful, day by day.

I wish you all a very happy new year. I will pray that this year will be free of obstacles and bring you great joy and greater inspiration to practice the dharma more purely. On behalf of Jetsunla and those of us here at Mindrolling and Samten Tse, Happy New Year.

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