



MINDROLLING INTERNATIONAL

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Transcripts & Documents

The Power of Karma and Importance of Merit

This address was given to participants at the 3rd Ngöndro Retreat at Lotus Garden by Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche who spoke from Mindrolling Monastery in India on February 20, 2011.

Hello everyone. How are you all? I am very glad to see everyone looking well—although this seems to be the year for mishaps to legs. This one has a leg in a cast, that one sprained an ankle; someone else broke a bone in their foot. These things happen, along with other physical illnesses. And, of course, the doctors will do their diagnoses and use very good methods to give us a picture of what we might encounter in our lives. But don't worry too much.



Practitioners must believe in the power of blessings, the power of prayers, and the power of the purification of karma. This is why you are all in retreat. If you *didn't* believe you could change your karma and acquire positive methods to use in this life, how could you have confidence in the possibility of attaining enlightenment and liberating all sentient beings?

For all the exertion and effort we put into this buddhist path to be honest and wholehearted, there has to be very strong confidence in the ability to attain a state of realization that becomes the cause of liberating oneself and all beings. The aspirations we make and the result we all aim for is this: a state of enlightenment free from the suffering of samsara, not only for oneself but also for all beings. And of all the practices, the ngöndro practices most importantly reflect this essence and emphasize this point.

Looking at it from the perspective of the result that you believe in, you should be encouraged to know you have the power to hold this result in your hands. You also need to know that this result entails the purification of karma and the acquiring of tremendous amounts of merit—which in turn become the accomplishment of the result.

Intellectualization and the Power of Obstacles

Many of today's practitioners put immense emphasis on the intellectualization of dharma. You then spend a lot of time swinging between two extremes: the view

and the difficulties you have maintaining the view. The process of trying to analyze, maintain, and have confidence in the view takes up so much time that it stays on the level of intellectual understanding. This is how the predominance of [theorizing] happens, while the actualization of practice takes a back seat. And this may be why today's practitioners tend to encounter obstacles and to be overwhelmed by obstacles very quickly.

You may believe in the power of prayers and the power purifying karma, but when you or a family member or friend do encounter difficulties, you become very easily shaken by those experiences. It's almost as if you believe the samsaric symptoms to be more powerful than the power of your practice, the power of your meditation, and the power of your understanding of the meaning of dharma.

As we encounter the different stages of life—when we will, of course, see all kinds of pain, suffering, and obstacles in our own and others' lives—it is crucial to use such times as greater encouragement, inspiration, and reminders to practice the dharma even more.

So the possibility of doing retreats is wonderful. I'm very delighted that you are all practicing in such a large number. We had hoped, from the beginning, that there would be series of retreats at Lotus Garden. Now I hope this will be an ongoing thing and not that people think, "This is this year, next year something else will happen."

Lotus Garden was meant to be a retreat land. And it is wonderful when there is a deepening of practice and you all spend more time, even four or five days—I've given up on your being there for life—living and practicing together. Attendance at retreats has been consistently strong. The residents have also shown great dedication. And there are the other senior practitioners and lopöns in the background, supporting and maintaining this and encouraging others to practice. Their caring, love, and genuine friendliness have been tremendously helpful for our students' understanding and practice of dharma.

You have all matured as practitioners and have now become really trusted students of dharma, capable of holding the contents of the precious teachings. You have become practitioners to whom I can no longer say, "Don't keep doing it intellectually." You are very much working with yourselves, which is all very nice.

The Meaning of Retreat

We have over 100 retreatants here in India. With people from over eighteen countries, it is interesting to see the mix of nationalities practicing together. At the same time—with all the uniqueness of countries and cultures—there are still similarities. Whether a practitioner is from Switzerland, Poland, Canada, or America, it is interesting to see how much sameness there is.

Some of the sameness I find is in the—I won't say "lack of," but "different"—understanding of what it means to be in retreat. For example, people have traveled from so many places, all ready to come into a monastic setting and sessions of intensive practice. At the same time, they want to see things and shop. Particularly the women; getting *chubas* made has been the big thing for the women. Nevertheless, like you, they are all very sincere and dedicated to the practices. So this brings to mind what it might mean to be in retreat.

Oftentimes, retreats seem to be dominated by your wish to finish with the technicalities of a practice. In retreat, you can do more ngöndro than you might otherwise be able to do; you have more hours for your formal practices, and you can probably devote more concentration to the practices and meditation—which is very good.

On the other hand, retreat may not be helping to emphasize the external part: your body and how you behave with your body, your speech and how you use that speech, and particularly the mind. Are you analyzing, observing, and keeping a very watchful eye on your thought process? On how you generate emotions and relate with sensations? Or on how you interpret feelings and act on those feelings and emotions?

If you don't very mindfully observe these, your good intention to do more practice may become very neurotic. And that neurosis often brings a sort of deliberateness, even from the technicalities of the practices. You then get into a very strange dilemma where you want the view but you are not *doing* the view, where you may be meditating but *not* meditating, simultaneously. It's a very difficult thing to explain. But if you keep watch on yourself, you will find there is a good part of you and a selfish part of you—and you spend a lot of time trying to overlap one part with the other.

The Culture of Dharma

Retreat has to be a place where you break free from everything that you are used

to being, and everything you usually allow to be so powerful in your mundane life. You must think, with humility, “No matter how much dedication I bring to my path of practice, I humbly accept the fact that samsara is very powerful and distractions are very powerful.”

When our own habitual patterns are strong or when certain situations—relationship responsibilities, environmental responsibilities, and so on—become very powerful, they make demands. And those demands are so powerful we cannot refuse to respond to them.

When you humbly reflect on the immense pull of samsara—because of which your understanding of dharma and the aspiration to sincerely practice the dharma encounter obstacles—then you *have* to wish to develop nonattachment and to concentrate on Buddha nature. But situations in samsara don’t honor that. So then you generate a strong intention to actually, physically, drop yourself from those situations into a situation that is conducive to the path of practice. And you go into retreat.

But just physically picking yourself up and putting yourself in retreat doesn’t help. When you physically come into retreat, you must also have the motivation and intention to let go of habitual ways of thinking and acting. Physically, you must abstain from those actions that have any traces of the kleshas: being physically very aggressive, or physically very strong in desire, attachment, or grasping—which may be as simple as grasping to the physical pleasures of where you sit, or the extra comfort of soft bedding. And be very watchful for the klesha of desire, or attachment, and for ignorance—be it inner absorption or outer distractions. In the same way, it is important to check for traces of the kleshas of jealousy and arrogance in your body, speech and, of course, your mind.

Coming into retreat, you must bring the powerful intention and determination to now break free from those habitual, samsaric ways of behaving, speaking, thinking, and coming into an environment.

When you are steeped in the practice of dharma, you embody the culture of dharma. You live like a dharma practitioner, because the environment you create *is* that. You speak with more thoughtfulness. And you keep your mind clean; I want to use the word “pure.” A clean mind is free of the negativities, which—other than your habitual intent to keep them—do not need to be nurtured, at least for the duration of the practice retreat.

When you say that you are “in retreat,” you are retreating from habitual patterns. You are retreating from samsara and cutting the ties to the root causes of confusion, ignorance, and suffering for yourself and others. This is a very important aspect of your formal practices and the intensive time you engage in formal practice.

What must be cultivated during retreat is a complete change and breaking free of samsaric patterns. As you go into further retreats—group retreats, solitary retreats, or whatever—keep this in mind.

Refuge, Bodhicitta, and Prostrations

In the same way, when you take refuge, you are taking refuge from samsara and the habitual ways of surrendering to samsara and the causes of samsara. You shift that to taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha—knowing that the Buddha, dharma, and sangha are, in fact, emphasizing the pure essence of your own awakened nature. Buddha is your awakened nature. Dharma is the sound, or expressive quality, of that awakened nature. And from that comes the ability to manifest that expressivity through your body, speech, and mind.

Seeing it this way allows the essence of the *outer* refuge in the outer Buddha, dharma, and sangha, and the *inner* refuge in the inner Buddha, dharma, and sangha—your own Buddha nature—to be realized.

When you take refuge, there must be sincere moments in the course of your session when, instead of surrendering to samsara, you surrender to your own awakened nature. And this has to be done with humility. The prostration part is the humility. It should constantly remind you of the humility in being united and abiding inseparably with your own awakened nature—because ego can be tricky. Ego can easily manipulate even a brilliant moment of remaining calmly united with your basic fundamental nature into either self-absorption or self-indulgence. As meditators, you must keep reminding yourselves of that.

Then, remaining calm and wakeful with humility, that humility is further enhanced by bodhicitta. Lopön Andre gave a beautiful example of bodhicitta as the breast milk that naturally flows when a mother gives birth to a child. When you give birth to bodhicitta, the expression of bodhicitta, or selfless kindness, should be as nurturing and natural as mother’s milk. This is a wonderful analogy to keep in mind. The expressivity of abiding in the awakened nature of your

intrinsic Buddha mind, or enlightened mind, has to be gentle and it has to be kind.

Now beyond all the beautiful words we use, what does “refuge and bodhicitta” actually mean? It means that you are intrinsically quiet, calm, wakeful, generous, and gentle to yourself and others. And in that gentleness, there is a very sharp or brilliant awareness of your environment. When all of these qualities are embraced by suppleness, pliancy, and flexibility, then you really understand the meaning of the first stage of the inner ngöndro: the refuge and bodhicitta practices.

The rigorous practices of refuge, bodhicitta, and prostrations should make one’s body, speech, and mind nothing but supple, wakeful, and genuinely gentle and kind to oneself and one’s environment. From a session of refuge, bodhicitta, and prostrations, there should come a perfect arhat and a perfect bodhisattva—at the same time, never letting go of the humility of knowing the power of karma and the lack of merit we all have.

Particularly the lay practitioners should reflect on this. Of course, the monks and nuns have their share of challenges. But most of you are lay practitioners, and you often forget that you live in the thick of samsara. As fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, mothers and sons—this, alone, is reason enough to know how easily and continuously karma is created. So reflect on karma and the power and impact of its manifestation.

Reflect, too, on the busy-ness of being driven by karma, which doesn’t give us much opportunity to accumulate merit. We try to remain awake and supple and kind; but we must also have the humility to know that karma doesn’t let the good qualities of refuge and bodhicitta manifest unimpededly. And because of ignorance, it is very difficult to encounter positive circumstances.

You have to take a very practical, honest approach to really looking at your store of merit. How far have you actually come with that? And don’t become a poet in this regard and come up with beautiful words for “my karma” and “my merit.” We lose our ground in various kinds of abstractness. And even when there is some awareness of the power of karma or lack of merit, we easily evade the issue with various kinds of rhetoric or explanation. And then the depth of what we are trying to find escapes us.

You need a very straightforward, down-to-earth attitude towards karma and merit. This means sitting down and looking at these things. How many karmas do you accumulate each day? How many of those karmas do you purify—or even remind yourself of? Look to see how much you actually remind yourself of the karma you accumulate. Nobody will be accountable for that karma but you. The result of that karma is what you will experience in this life and what you will take into death—and every experience after that.

In the same way, each day look at merit. Do you mindfully exert enough effort to acquire and build up merit, engaging in meritorious actions of body, speech, and mind? When a meditator, especially a lay practitioner, reflects upon this, it is humbling to see how continuously we create endless, seamless, innumerable karmas, and how lacking we are in merit.

Sometimes we may accidentally have an opportunity to accumulate merit, and we may sometimes make a conscious effort to be meritorious. But oftentimes when I speak about merit, people just take out their checkbooks and make donations to one of the charitable projects. Then you're done with meritorious activity: "If Rinpoche expects me to make a donation to a charitable project, I've done so." And until you hear the next talk on merit, you don't concentrate on it.

This is not the way to accumulate merit. Merit must be the appearance and the manifestation of the six paramitas in every aspect of your life: wherever you are, in whatever environment and whatever activity you may be doing.

Realizing the importance of accumulating merit, and seeing the power of karma—then we will have the humility to know how much we need to train ourselves so the result of refuge and bodhicitta, the awakened kindness, is further enhanced and supported. And one of the main things we will all find is how very little time we have given ourselves to become familiar with a heart that is always flexible, always kind, and always awake.

Vajrasattva Practice

Vajrasattva practice allows us to give ourselves the opportunity to realize two things. First, it familiarizes us with the awakened nature, which is pure and does not need the kleshas to survive or actually do something good for our selves and others. Second, it allows us to become confident in the awakened nature and less reliant on the kleshas—which ego is trying to convince us are necessary for surviving in samsara.

This is why our great teachers not only survived, but also manifested boundless activity that sustained the lives of thousands of others.

Now look at ourselves: fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, and families just trying to pay the mortgage and monthly bills, just trying to live our lives. How does that work? You spend your entire life working hard, yet the struggle is always there. Year after year, the fear of “making it” is always there. Our teachers, by comparison, not only seemingly survive very beautifully in this world, they create this wealth and these magnificent environments where hundreds of others can actually—without any concerns, without any worries—live and sustain a life of practice.

This does not happen because of miracles. It happens because they are so confident in their pure nature, to the point that they do not rely on samsara and kleshas to live life or to manifest anything.

As meditators, you have to think about this. What do these great masters have, or what have they done to be able to accomplish this? You will find it is because their karma is purified; they are not creating any negative karma. And their merit is enormous. They are continuously engaging in activities that are nothing but meritorious. In doing so, they have no fear of breaking free from samsaric restrictions, because they trust their awakened nature so much more. And that trust has been supported by formal practice.

Now, when you do the Vajrasattva mantra recitation, amrita flows from the HUM syllable at the naval of the five-pronged vajra held at the heart of Vajrasattva. Around the HUM syllable, the mantra garland is rotating. This rotation creates a powerful energy, or force, that overflows in the form of amrita from the naval of the vajra. In Tibetan this force is called *monlam gyi tob* [smon lam gyi stob], the “power of aspiration.”

While the rotation of the mantra garland is not necessarily symbolic, it could be taken to show the aspiration’s “force.” It is the force of your aspiration to be free of the overwhelming power of karma, and the powerful force of the aspiration to have virtue at your heart. In this way the rotation of the mantra could be seen as strengthening the emphasis on the power of your aspiration.

Whether it is the power of devotion, the power of diligence, the power of genuine exertion of effort or of genuinely wishing to realize the cessation of the

cause of suffering of all sentient beings—when the power of aspiration is strong enough, it is able to bring about purification.

Think about it this way. As Vajrasattva's amrita is "empowered" by the swirling mantra garland, what are you, the meditator, doing? You are generating a powerful wish to abide more naturally and inseparably in that awakened nature that we talked about in the context of refuge and bodhicitta. To generate such a powerful aspiration, you would not only need truly strong devotion; you would also need to have a powerful understanding of the negative tendencies and consequences of unvirtuous actions, and the profound quality and value of virtuous actions.

For example, the outcome of a retreat or the accomplishment of Vajrasattva practice should be a strong, natural distaste for habitual neurosis—thus actually developing the purification of karma. There should also be a much more genuine wish to nurture those activities that express the qualities of bodhicitta—which is merit. And in this way, you become free of your belief in needing to depend on the kleshas to survive in samsara.

The mind that is free from the captivating grasp of samsaric habitual patterns naturally has more awakened qualities of merit—merit being nothing more than the ability to express aspiration bodhicitta and engaged bodhicitta. The result, or fruition, of the practice of Vajrasattva should be a meditator who realizes this.

Now, as you practice Vajrasattva more and more, you would find your mind becomes truly trusting in being able to refrain from habitual neurosis and still make it through samsara. This confidence enables you to keep a pure heart, pure intention, and to engage in pure actions. Thus meritorious virtuous conduct is its natural expression.

This is the way you bring about the resultant stage of your bodhisattva vows. You not only *think* bodhicitta, you now are ready to engage in bodhicitta. As a bodhisattva traversing the path to buddhahood, what do you think that bodhisattva does? What do you think the "career" of a bodhisattva looks like? A career bodhisattva is someone who not only has bodhicitta intent, but also puts bodhicitta in action—and then progresses to the path of buddhahood. The whole purpose of the first two stages of the ngöndro practices should be seen in this way.

But remember: all of this will remain more of an aspiration than reality, because we have been in samsara for a very long time. For the aspiration to actually accomplish this fruition, you will need two things. First, you need to really work to lessen self-grasping; second, you need the genuine support of all the practices that have arisen from the wisdom of the gurus and the teachings.

This brings us to the latter two segments of the ngöndro practices.

Mandala Practice

Mandala is that part of ngöndro which best enhances the “reminding” quality of the mind. It reminds you that what you are doing must never be manipulated by ego mind into self-absorption. That is where meditators—even those of you who go into retreat—fail to realize how easily ego steps in, again and again, and manipulates the whole view; how easily ego traps you in self-importance and self-absorption until you almost isolate yourself in retreat, imagining retreat to be some kind of ambitious project.

Meditators must be very acutely aware of the distortions that ego will bring in. You can't imagine how easily the ego makes bodhicitta into an ambitious project; how it makes silence or a half-hour session of ngöndro into an ambitious project; how it even makes buddhahood and the realization of basic nature into an ambitious project. So watch out for that. The antidote for that is selflessness. This means lessening self-grasping, lessening self-absorption, and lessening your demand for all the paraphernalia you demand from the external world to sustain your self-importance.

Generosity is the integral essence of mandala. In the form of vast offerings, including the sun and the moon, you give away everything you can think of that is most excellent and best, to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Why do you do this? You do it to know that the self-grasping mind, that stingy mind, is not needed. Through lessening self-grasping, fearlessness arises in the mind of the meditator.

Ordinarily, so many things seem so important. So many things are the *only* way to lessen self-grasping and bring freedom from self-absorption: “I need a good teacher, I need good teachings, I need good retreat places, I need time, I need understanding from others, I need all my practice liturgies, I need somebody to show me how to do these practices, I need guidance, I need answers to my very good questions.”

When you're always afraid that everything must be given to you and that all your demands must be met—and only then will you be able to do this—giving up is difficult. If you have very little at the start, giving up is that much easier. Keep that in mind.

Now—after refuge, bodhicitta, prostrations, and Vajrasattva mantra—mandala is where vajrayana meditators begin to more or less engage in the actual practice and view of vajrayana. To be a suitable vessel for vajrayana, you have to have the suitable qualities. The suitable qualities are the manifestation of fearlessness and gentle calmness.

Restlessness and a mind that is weak and lacking in confidence are the traits of someone very much in love with him- or herself, someone with greater self-absorption or lack of courage. The greater the arrogance, the weaker the confidence. All the negative, demanding tendencies of arrogance, jealousy, and selfishness are actually cover-ups of a very weak mind—which is due to immense attachment to the self.

When you practice mandala, encourage yourself to know that you do not need *things*, you do not need concepts, you do not need anything conjured up by a very active mind to sustain the confidence of actually remaining immovable and inseparable from your own awakened nature. So give up the moon, give up the continents, give up your hope, give up your families, give up your material wealth, and give up all your worries about your future. Why do you hold on to them, anyway?

Now, giving up doesn't mean throwing them away. That's not necessary. But the attachment, you can do without. Even without self-grasping attachment to your family, you can fulfill your responsibilities. You can be a good father without self-grasping and self-importance. You can be a wealthy person without attachment to wealth. Whether you are endowed with many relations and much wealth or not, it should be the same for any vajrayana meditator—because a vajrayana meditator trusts the awakened nature more than anything else. For that understanding, we need the support of the teachings. And as the teaching say, the teachings would not be possible without the enormous kindness of all our masters and all the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Guru Yoga Practice

Guru devotion and guru yoga give us enormous support in knowing who to

emulate and whose example to follow. And how arrogant would it be to think that we don't need support on the path of practice? Guru devotion also enriches the mind with the wisdom and experiences of all the teachers and teachings.

Just imagine—along with the Four Reminders and the cultivation of the essence of the four aspects of inner ngöndro—what a beautiful, jewel-like awakened mind would arise from that. To such a point that after ngöndro, you may not need to do anything else. Therefore recognize the importance of ngöndro, and the wonderful opportunity you have to practice it. And remind yourself, again and again, that it should never be regarded as a time- and number-dominated practice.

Some people think you can do ngöndro in two months. And of course you could finish your ngöndro in two months—but after that, make sure that you have no more karma and nothing more to do in terms of merit. Make sure that the awakened nature is indivisible, that the awake sanity is supple, and that you express nothing but genuine kindness to others. Then you could do it in five days and I'd be very happy. Some people want to do ngöndro without counting, some people want to do it in 100 days—that's also very good. But many of us think we could do ngöndro again and again, throughout our lives, because the power of karma and all our habitual tendencies is so very strong.

It is up to each one of you to develop a heart connection to ngöndro. Give less importance to what others say about how the practices should be done. The guidance is always very well meant, and so listen to it. But nobody knows how stubborn your karmic habitual tendencies may be, but you. So make that decision yourself. Nobody knows how aware you are or how much merit you may have been able to accumulate. Make your decision about how your ngöndro practice should be done based on that. Nobody knows what would best enhance the awakened mind and your ability to remain inseparable from it, but you. Do the ngöndro practices in order to bring that about. How much you need to do or how often you need to do it is basically up to you. This is your path of practice; you should be responsible for it, and no one else.

Questions have also come up about which ngöndro to do: this one, that one, and how to integrate the various ngöndros. Should one do two or just one? I've gone through these questions many times. There is no difference in any ngöndro, long or short, however it may be done.

Most often, the only reason you end up with many different ngöndro liturgies is because you keep asking teachers questions. For example, after the Gongpa Zangthal, someone asked what we should do as a samaya practice—as if all the samayas you already had were done and you needed something more. Out of the kindness of the teacher, you were given Gongpa Zangthal’s short ngöndro; and if you took the empowerment, you should do that. As a samaya, keep in mind to integrate the Gongpa Zangthal ngöndro into your retreats, or do it individually at some point in your life. Then it is done with. And if you see that as your main ngöndro, you could do that. But if you have already been doing some other ngöndro, you should continue with that.

There was also a question about the relationship between the foundation ngöndro and Gongpa Zangthal ngöndro. Now, I keep hearing about “relationships”—and not only with regard to ngöndro. So, let’s say the Gongpa Zangthal ngöndro is the “husband” of the Ati Zabdön ngöndro. But you know not everything needs to be in relationship. If you like several of them, try to do them all. If you have less time, concentrate on what you are holding in the moment.

Always appreciate the practice that you are holding at this moment. Make that good. With the blessings of the Buddha, if your life is long you may have the opportunity to do many other practices. There is no harm in keeping that aspiration. But do what you can do now. Do it wholeheartedly as it has been taught, and the fruition will come.

But you shouldn’t act like the monkeys in the fruit trees around the residence of Mayumla, our mother. Every morning we find the monkeys trying to get fruit from the trees. They are actually very sweet to watch, as they stuff both hands full and their mouths stuffed full—and then try to run and climb the trees.

This is how practitioners sometimes go about it: hanging on to one practice, while holding ngöndro between their teeth and then trying to practice bodhicitta. But sometimes the monkeys get chased; and with their hands and mouths so full, they have nothing to hold on with when they jump from one place to another. Then they fall.

You have earned this precious human existence to practice the dharma. Bring it to fruition. You can bring it to fruition with the wonderful eight aspects of the outer and inner ngöndro practices. If this were all that you could do in this life, there would be no need to do anything else.

OK. That's it for today. I hope you all keep well. Thank you all for practicing. When you come to Lotus Garden, you should not see it as coming to a dharma center, but as coming to your own home—not a samsaric home, but a dharma home, a place where you can really be true to your intention to practice.

There has to be flexibility and ease in the way you relate to the land and the teachers and the practice path here. So that as you come more and more often to practice, you bring less and less pretentiousness, less and less deliberateness, and fewer formalities and protocols. You come with a pure intention to practice. Then the whole environment reverberates with the power, the blessings, and the energy of the practice and practitioners. I think this has been done, with the efforts of many people. I appreciate that very much, and I hope it will be continuous.

Until I see you again, please take care of yourselves and take care of one another. Guide each other on the path of practice. Point out neurosis—and more importantly, when it is pointed out, learn to appreciate that and take it in good spirit.

The elders should nurture and nourish and care for the younger ones. And the younger ones, in age and in experience, should always respect the older students and older dharma practitioners. Where there is mutual love and respect, you will have a healthy sangha. When the sangha is healthy and harmonious, it brings the blessings of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. And that can only dispel more obstacles and make your practice stronger and less hindered by outer circumstances.

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