

~From the Archives of Teachings by Venerable Gyatrul Rinpoche~

Foundations of Practice and Dharma Community

In March of 2009, Venerable Gyatrul Rinpoche sent the following message to the dharma community of Dorje Ling in Portland, Oregon.

Part 4

Preparing the Ground

So, we have people coming to practice at this center, a few people. A few is fine! Having just a few is no problem! The important thing isn't if there are many or a few, but if the ones who come have real interest. That is what will make the difference between having a dharma center or not.

Everywhere it is like this—all the dharma centers, when they start, it is a few people who have real interest, who come and do the practices and take care of the dharma center. That is what it takes, and that is all it takes.

It doesn't take anything fancy, just a few committed people maintaining the place and the practice. At Tashi Chöling and Orgyen Dorje Den and everywhere, it is like this.

And if those first few stick with it and maintain the center as a place of dharma, then slowly it will grow, other people will be drawn to it and connect with it as well, and then eventually lamas can come and give more empowerments and teachings and it gets bigger and bigger.

But it always starts like this. So, know that in starting a dharma center, it doesn't happen in one day—it is a long and slow process.

And it is the same in the practice! Developing wisdom doesn't happen in one day—it is a long and slow process, too. Actually, maybe Manjushri developed wisdom immediately, but since then nobody has been able to. Nobody has push-button wisdom. So slow down and start at the beginning and go slowly, slowly.

It is just like a farmer with his farm. If you have ever seen a farmer work his fields,

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~Translated and edited by Shashi Reitz~*

there are so many things that he does—even before he plants the seeds! First he goes over the ground and takes out all the sticks and stones so then the soil is good. Then he takes out whatever sentient beings would want to eat his crops—deer or bugs or whatever. And if he really wants to keep them out, he builds a fence so they can't come back in. Then he digs and checks everything again and makes sure it is smooth and good. Only then—finally!—does he plant his seeds!

This is like us doing the ngöndro practice. We have to prepare our fields, our minds, so the sprouts of practice can grow and then the harvest of realization will ripen. So, we need to take out all the sticks and stones, which are like our own negativities, getting in the way. And we have to remove the beings who would destroy our crops, which are like our five poisons (pride, jealousy, desire, hatred, ignorance). If we don't prepare the ground, there is no way that the plants can grow.

In the ngöndro, this is what we do. Clearing the ground—that is like purifying negativity, as we do in the Vajrasattva section of the practice, for example. And planting the seeds—that is like accumulating merit, such as in the practice of mandala offerings. So, this is the basis, and however much we prepare at this stage, that is how rich and bountiful our crops will be when they ripen.

We need the Four Thoughts in order to understand why to begin this process at all. However much we understand the Four Thoughts and embrace their implications, that is how much we will be motivated to purify our obscurations and accumulate virtue.

You can check in your own mind and see how well you are understanding the Four Thoughts because that is how much enthusiasm and joy and delight in practice you will have. Nobody can command you: “Now take joy in dharma practice!” It doesn't work. But if we contemplate the Four Thoughts, naturally delight and enthusiasm for dharma practice and all kinds of virtue will well forth in our minds.

~ teaching continues in Part 5...