

~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 1

Motivation is Crucial

Are people coming to the center? Are they learning? Are they practicing? Are they learning about ngöndro, the preliminary practices? This is the most important one, to learn about ngöndro. This is the basis, the foundation for everything.

So how do we learn about ngöndro? You do have practice there at the center every week, and Clark¹ and other students who have studied a little bit and have been practicing for some years can explain the stages and some of the meaning. Clark does know these things, and he can share a little bit with everybody.

And also everyone, especially when studying ngöndro, should read *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. It contains everything! Everything is in this book—the proper way to listen to teachings and receive the dharma, the stages of the ngöndro and their meaning, how to follow a teacher and the proper way to rely on and relate to one, and the motivation that one should always have during dharma practice.

This last is particularly crucial, in dharma and in everything that we do. The difference between doing something meaningful and wasting your time is your motivation. The difference between virtue and non-virtue is your motivation. In this book, you will find very clear explanations of what a correct motivation is and how to cultivate it. There are different kinds of motivation in Foundational Vehicle practice, on the Great Vehicle path, and when practicing and engaging in the Vajra Vehicle. But whatever vehicle we are practicing, it is

¹ Clark Hansen, Rinpoche's longtime and devoted student and the founder of Dorje Ling.

certain that there is a correct motivation to be understood, recognized, cultivated, and maintained.

If you are wondering what your motivation is, look in your own mind. We do know ourselves! If you are wondering what your motivation should be, you can look in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Since we have our mind and we have this book, we don't have any excuse not to know what a proper motivation is ...and no excuse not to cultivate it, either!

It is only through a proper motivation that we can purify our obscurations, which is how we will make ourselves into fit vessels, or recipients, of the precious teachings—able to take them in and put them into practice.

Because this is the point: to put the teachings into practice! To bring them into our minds and hold them in our hearts, which is how they will be able to effect a profound change in our lives.

It is not enough just to hear them. People are always saying, “I heard such-and-such.” In fact, when people are gossiping, they always say, “Oh, did you hear? I heard blah blah blah...” and then create a lot of negativity with their stupid mouths. But in dharma it isn't enough to just hear or just talk about it with your mouth. “I heard” isn't enough. We need “I know,” “I understand,” “I realize.”

~ *teaching continues in Part 2...*

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Part 2

Examining the Four Thoughts

How do we get from “I heard” to “I know”? We have to practice. We have to take what we have heard or read about the dharma and ask ourselves, “Is this true? Does this make sense? How does this apply to me, to my situation in my life? Does this match my experience? Does this relate to how I see the outer world? Or my own mind?”

The Words of My Perfect Teacher and other books and teachings give us wonderful ways of thinking about the ngöndro practice, starting with the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to Dharma.¹ If you don't have a lama around giving teachings, that's okay. You have this book, which is a wonderful treasure all about ngöndro. There is no excuse! We can study many teachings with this book. And as soon as we have heard a teaching or read a little bit, we can begin to internalize it, to examine it and contemplate it. This is the process of how to get from “I heard” to “I know.”

Or, for example, with the practice of refuge, rather than just mumbling the refuge verses without meaning, you can ask yourself: “Why do I practice? Why take refuge? What am I taking refuge in, and why take refuge in that and not something else?” From *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and from other teachings, you can read and hear about the qualities of the objects of refuge. It is only by understanding the qualities of the refuge objects—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—that you have any sense of why they are worthy of your trust

¹ The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to Dharma are the contemplations on: 1) the precious human birth, 2) the truth of impermanence and death, 3) the law of karma, or cause and result, and 4) the fundamentally unsatisfactory nature of cyclic existence.

and the reasons to take refuge in them. And it is only by understanding the suffering nature of samsara that you understand what you are taking refuge from.

If we are earnestly applying ourselves in this process with the ngöndro, starting with the Four Thoughts, it will begin to work changes in our mind. Understanding the law of karma, we will be motivated to engage in virtue and avoid non-virtue. Seeing the unsatisfactory nature of samsara, our minds will turn to the dharma.

With our motivation shaped by our understanding of the Four Thoughts, then whatever we do becomes dharma practice, whether or not we are sitting on a cushion.

We can engage in this process of bringing the dharma into our hearts wherever we are, whatever we are doing in our daily lives in the world. We can always contemplate impermanence, we can always consider the preciousness of our human rebirth, we can always think on the law of karma. You don't need to take a lama everywhere with you or always have a book open in front of you! You only need to recognize that you have the opportunity to engage in dharma every moment, and use those moments to recall and think about these fundamental dharma concepts again and again, and this will guarantee that you are not wasting any chance at performing virtue. In this way, all of your activities can be dharma training.

~ teaching continues in Part 3...

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Part 3

The Transformative Power of the Four Thoughts

Now, sometimes we read an inspiring teaching or a lama gives an electrifying talk and we get all excited about dharma, jumping up and down almost, like we would be excited about any worldly thing. And, like any sense of worldly exhilaration, it will pass. If this is our only connection to dharma and our only reason for doing dharma, this excitement, then when it inevitably fades we will drop our practice. Sincerely practicing the dharma means not just doing it for a weekend while the inspiration lasts or as a cool thing to try with our friends, which will never bring us real benefit. It means to really practice sincerely with a long view and with commitment. This is how the teachings can permeate our lives and bring about profound change. If we want to practice in this heartfelt, transformative way, then we need these Four Thoughts as our foundation.

The Four Thoughts *will* turn our minds to dharma, just like their name, if we internalize them and let their implications naturally shape our behavior. This is particularly true with the contemplation on the truth of the impermanent nature of all things and the inevitability of our own fast-approaching death. Understanding impermanence, you will really change!

But you have to take the time and put out the effort to recognize this truth for yourself. No teaching will do that for you, no book can do that for you. Books and teachings give us the tools we need to understand and contemplate, but we each have to grapple with the ideas and bring them into our own hearts ourselves.

However, this is a practice that we can do anytime, anywhere. If you ask, how can I contemplate impermanence? You need only look around! Externally, our environment and the things and people we interact with are always in motion, never remaining the same for even an instant. Internally, our thoughts rush in an unceasing, ever-changing flow. You don't have to think abstractly or be terribly clever to find an example of impermanence—just look at your own mind! Just look at our world! Our experience is made up of one example of impermanence after another. You don't even need to ponder deeply—just look and there they are, anytime!

But we usually ignore this truth that is before our eyes all the time, and so of course we ignore its implication for our own lives, which is that we have no time to waste.

Taking the time to understand impermanence, and then similarly investigate each subsequent stage of the ngöndro practice, our minds will naturally turn toward dharma. We will want to practice, because we will understand why. We will understand the benefits of exerting ourselves in this most meaningful of activities, and then it will be easy to make dharma practice a priority in our lives and to engage in practice wholeheartedly.

What will get in the way of this deep transformation is laziness, which is not wanting to take the time and trouble to think these ideas through for ourselves.

And pride! In dharma, pride is the biggest obstacle. And pride is very sneaky, because our egos are strong and skilled and sneaky. Thinking, “I'm a busy guy, I can't be bothered with these preliminaries! Just give me the real thing, I want to go straight to the main attraction!” This is a kind of pride, the pride of thinking you are too good to start at the beginning of the practice.

Sorry! That doesn't work!

~ teaching continues in Part 4...

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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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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...

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Part 5

Planting the Seeds

If we practice these preliminaries wholeheartedly, bringing all of our creativity and energy and inner resources to bear, then we will not only be able to clear out the sticks and stones and pests from the farm of our mind, but naturally an inner fence will arise. This is just a metaphor that means that if we purify our negativity, it will not return, like having a good fence that keeps out the deer. Our bad habits and negative emotions and all non-virtuous thoughts will not arise, will not be able to harm us, if we eliminate them through correct practice.

In the ngöndro, truly understanding why and how to practice is our protection. It is like our protective fence or our armor—if we make everything that we do a dharma practice, then even things that arise that would seem to obstruct or harm our practice cannot affect us. If we see whatever comes to us, externally or in our arising thoughts, as an opportunity to practice, then how could any circumstance hinder that practice? This is the best protection, the best fence. Then we can plant seeds in the ground we have so carefully prepared, and they will be able to grow, blossom, and bear fruit.

So first we have to eliminate negativity; and then when we've cleared away all the “junk” and made sure it will stay away, then we can plant our seeds of merit and of wisdom here, on our own farm, in our own mind which is our own home.

We plant our seeds and then we have to care for them, water them and weed among them and fertilize them with horsey poops and chicken poops and all kinds of things, because then they say that you will get really good greens in the summer! You plant the seeds and

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tend them, and then the shoots are so cute coming out of the ground! But the shoots and greens and flowers and crops can only come if we have done the preparatory work.

So, in practice, if you really want to practice, then you need this foundation. Without it, then any practice that you do is just blah blah blah. No matter how high a practice you say you are doing, it will just be hot air.

Like me—I am eighty-five years old, and I have gone through ngöndro many times: doing the prostrations as fast as I could, mumbling the verses, saying the Vajrasattva and Guru Yoga mantras while my mind was everywhere else, buzzing. Thus, I never really did the practice, just accumulated the numbers. Therefore, if you look at my farm, there are not only sticks and stones still in my field but snakes and tigers of the five poisons—everything is there! Not one sprout could grow! So don't be like me.

~ teaching continues in Part 6...

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Part 6

Patience in Practice and in the Dharma Center

We need to slowly recognize, first, what are the qualities of the practice? What is the benefit of doing the ngöndro? How do we do the practice so that it makes us better people, makes us more noble?

Those who practice dzogchen, who are authentic practitioners and know the nature of reality, for them that practice of dzogchen makes them noble. For those who practice mahayoga and anuyoga, if they have skillful means and wisdom, then that practice makes them noble.

Just to sit like a big mountain is no good—that's not practice. Just studying yoga like hippies in Mount Shasta, and learning how to have yoga sex, that is not practice. The real practice is what will benefit us, now and in the future, and benefit all beings. And that kind of practice can only be done slowly, stage by stage.

This guy here, Clark, he is a *gelong* (fully ordained monk). Of course he needs to really clean his farm. But he does! He does do this, steadily. We should all practice slowly, slowly, steadily like this.

And if we say that we are too busy to practice, well, our whole life we have been busy 'til now, and we got...what?

We got nothing.

If we just keep on like we are, when the time comes to die, we will be as confused and screwed up as we are now.

So now is when we have the choice to practice. And now is when we have a chance to have a dharma center—you few people with interest! I have been here in the West for thirty years, starting dharma centers and pretending to teach, and in all this I have been learning patience. My gurus sent me here to the West—His Holiness the Dalai Lama, His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, and His Holiness the Karmapa. They sent me here for this opportunity to practice patience.

So that is what I have been doing here. I have been teaching—pretending to, in a broken way, struggling and struggling without being tired. This has been my *jindak* (sponsor). In what I have done, I have tried to concentrate and not be distracted—I have no real meditation, but that has been what meditation I do have. I don't have wisdom, but I have always tried to use skillful means, in my interactions with people and different situations. That is all the wisdom I have.

So, we all need to have patience, a little bit—everybody does.

~ teaching continues in Part 7...

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Part 7

Waking up to the Preciousness of the Dharma Center

We all need patience—especially when you are starting a center and everything is new and has to be figured out!

Also, everyone needs discipline. Really. Right now, we have no success in our dharma practice and no success in our worldly endeavors because we have no merit. And without merit, we have no wisdom, either. So, we strike out on two counts. It is through discipline that we can generate merit and purify our obscurations, which clears the way for wisdom to arise.

This is really why we need a dharma center—because we need merit in order to accomplish anything, and a dharma center is a hotbed of merit! Any support that we offer the dharma center—coming to practice here, sweeping the floor, making offerings, cutting the hedge—generates merit and purifies our obscurations.

What makes it a dharma center is it offers a place to practice and contains supports of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind. We call them 'supports,' but it isn't the Buddhas and bodhisattvas who need our support—it is *we* who need the support of statues, texts, stupas, and other representations of the Three Jewels. They support our practice by reminding us of our buddha nature, our wisdom nature that we are trying to realize. They also support our progress on the path by giving us opportunities to generate merit through interacting with them.

So how do we use the supports here and the dharma center itself to generate merit? Everything you do to maintain and develop this place is an offering to the objects of refuge

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and generates merit and purifies our negativity. With our ordinary thinking, we can't conceive of the preciousness of our opportunities regarding this place!

If you see a dish that is cracked and you buy a new one and replace it, that produces merit, for example. Even such a seemingly small thing as that.

We can get caught up in thinking that generosity is only on a large scale, that you have to offer millions of dollars and buy fancy gold things and then you are a 'sponsor' and such a big deal. I don't think it has to be that. If you have one penny, you can buy some clean water with it and offer it in the offering bowls. This is generosity, too. Or being generous with your time, coming here to clean or fix something or weed the flowers. There are many ways to make offerings.

This monkey, this yellow one,¹ he has offered this whole house to his lamas and the sangha. If we just think that we are coming here to Clark's house, then we are making a big mistake. Of course he is staying here—he is a monk; he has no other place to stay! He can stay here until he dies, keeping the place nicely. But he doesn't own anything. It is not his house—he gave it to you already.

I think maybe you guys don't see this, one way. If you just see it as Clark's place and you think that coming to help out here is just helping him, then the merit you are making will likewise be small, on that same scale. But instead, you can recognize how much more precious this place is. It is a dharma center, a sacred place of practice, complete with exquisite representations of the objects of refuge and filled with profound teachings and practices in the form of Tibetan pechas and other texts, where lamas like Lingtrul Rinpoche and the Khenpo brothers have given teachings and empowerments. Knowing this, then your activities here will be likewise more deeply meaningful. I think everybody needs to wake up about this a little bit.

~ teaching continues in Part 8...

¹ i.e., the monk, Clark. Clark was blond, and Rinpoche often referred to him as “yellow” or “yellow monkey.”

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Part 8

Wisdom and Compassion, Step by Step

In one way you do have compassion, but in one way you don't know what compassion really is.

Also, you do have a kind of wisdom, but you don't know which wisdom, or if this wisdom or that one is the most important.

What kind of wisdom can benefit you and all others? What kind of wisdom will be useful to you when you die?

You can learn about authentic compassion, what it is and how to cultivate it, in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. There are also students who have been studying a little bit, and they can help answer some of your questions. Everyone should help each other! Share what you do know. We are all trying to learn the same things.

For wisdom, you can say that there are three wisdoms: the wisdom of study or listening, the wisdom of contemplating, and the wisdom of meditation, which comes from practice. It is the wisdom of meditation that brings you the result. Each wisdom depends on the previous one: you must hear and study the teachings, which brings the initial wisdom of listening, in order to contemplate them. You must investigate and consider the teachings you have heard: This brings the wisdom of contemplation. But if you don't listen to begin with, how are you going to contemplate? What are you going to contemplate? And if you don't hear or contemplate the teachings, how could you begin to meditate on them? Without sustained practice, which brings the wisdom of meditation, how can you get the result?

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Notice that in this explanation there are three steps. There are stages, showing that the path is gradual. So don't think that wisdom is push-button. Nobody has push-button wisdom. Even Buddha Shakyamuni himself didn't have that kind of wisdom, which is why he showed the example of his own liberation stage by stage. Actually, maybe somebody in some universe does have push-button wisdom, but we are not qualified.

In Tibet, we have a bad tradition of praying to the lamas: “Please, lama, save me! Help me!” And then we expect the lama to take care of our liberation for us while we run out and commit non-virtue! If we are being negative all the time, how can the lama, or even all the Buddhas of the three times, save us?

We pray, “Please save me! Be compassionate!” But then we ignore the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni and our lineage lamas. They can't save us. They teach us, planting seeds, telling us to purify our negativity and accumulate merit. They teach us, and we ignore it. We are lazy and don't even try.

But we have plenty of enthusiasm for accumulating negativity and non-virtue, and we are quick and eager to give up what little virtue we have managed to cultivate. This is like going to a doctor and saying, “Doctor, save me! Cure me! Help me!” —begging him. So, then the doctor gives us medicine and gives us instructions on how to take the medicine and what we should and shouldn't do. But if we ignore his instructions and leave the medicine in the bottle, we will not be cured. Instead, we will end up dead. Then, knowing our crazy thinking, we will blame the doctor for not saving us!

It is the same with the teachings. We each need to take them in. Just leaving the teachings in the book or on the tape recorder doesn't work—it doesn't benefit us and it doesn't benefit the tape recorder, either! We are the ones who need to practice, we are the ones who need to take the Buddha's medicine.

But we are so blind, so ignorant, we don't know how to begin to benefit ourselves or anyone else. Instead, we throw away the precious medicine of the Buddha's teaching, and we

make our five poisons—or more like countless poisons!—into a big, important deal.

Even if someone does some studying, they just say, “I am a scholar, so important!” and then do things their own way. A person like this doesn't need a lama, doesn't need the Buddha! A guru wouldn't do them any good, because they only listen to themselves!

But beings like us, if we see we are suffering, if we want to practice the path, then we do need a lama. And it doesn't matter if that lama is a she or a he, if they are poor or ugly or black or brown or red or yellow or green or whatever. It doesn't matter who teaches you, if they teach you pure dharma. The most honest, humble one—that one we do need. But we always look over that one, and want a Tibetan one, and the one on the high throne. Doesn't work! Sorry!

And if we somehow manage to get a real, good lama, and they speak the precious dharma to us, telling us to give up the five poisons, then we don't listen. We say, “Oh, this other lama gives me hugs, kisses, praise, gives me something.” But that is not a lama of real compassion.

Real compassion is to give us the dharma, even when we spit it out. A real lama thinks only of the dharma, and of sentient beings.

~ teaching concludes in Part 9...

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Part 9

Conclusion: Everyone can Offer Their Kindness a Little Bit

So here at this center, everyone is slowly, slowly learning the practices, slowly learning the dharma. That is very good. Coming and practicing together will really make a sangha. And part of being a sangha is seeing that this is everyone's center, the sangha's center, and taking care of it like that. Right now, if nobody does anything, this monkey, the yellow one,¹ will take care of everything, cleaning and tidying and making offerings and keeping everything nice and weeding the flowers all by himself, because he is so stingy! He is keeping all the merit for himself!

Always waiting for somebody else to take care of everything is no good. We need to grow up, and we need to stand on our own feet. Everyone in the group can contribute. Not just Clark, but other people can work on getting cushions made, and making practice tables so the texts are up off the floor.

Because of Clark's kindness, we have a place. But now everyone can offer their kindness, a little bit, to help the center. We all come to this place, so look around like it is your place and ask yourself what needs to be done. If you see something that needs to be done, do it! Get someone to help you. People know how to do different things. You don't have to make a big deal, just check and see what needs to be done and then do that. Help each other.

As for me, I am going to the cemetery soon. If you are doing things for the center now and you think you are working for Rinpoche, then what is going to happen when I'm dead?

¹ Some of Rinpoche's nicknames for Clark Hansen, Dorje Ling's founder.

Do you think at that time you won't need to help the center, you won't need a center at all because Rinpoche is dead? I don't think so.

Actually, “Rinpoche” doesn't need a center now. I don't need a center—I am here in Half Moon Bay with my heated swimming pool! You are the ones who need a center. You need a place to practice, a place to learn, a place where you can purify obscurations and accumulate merit, a place to farm your fields nicely.

And then you need to do it! Just having a building called a center isn't enough—then you have to use it for practicing, studying, learning, and all the ways of doing the dharma. This is our opportunity, to practice patience and clear away our obscurations. So, we all need to grow up a little bit.

So, thank you to everyone who has been coming and learning, slowly, slowly. Piece by piece, if we each study and if we work together harmoniously, it will happen. Right now, everyone is really trying hard, so thank you. If you want to have a place and have a sangha, then really everyone just needs to keep coming, keep practicing, keep doing tsogs together, help each other. A little bit, little bit, every week, as you can. Then maybe I can come this summer, if my body lets me. Maybe I will come and hang out, and stay maybe one month. We will see. I hope so.

But for now, thank you, and Tashi Delek to everyone.

