



MINDROLLING INTERNATIONAL

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Transcripts & Documents

Following in the Footsteps of Great Teachers and Bodhisattvas

This address was given by Her Eminence Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche on 14 November 2010, speaking from Samten Tse Retreat Centre, India, to participants in the 1st of a series of Ngöndro Retreats at Lotus Garden.

Hello everyone. I hope the retreat at Lotus Garden is going well. To those of you practicing individually or with your study groups, I also extend my greetings. And I would, again, like to say how important it is for everyone to recognize that the vision of Lotus Garden is to emphasize retreat practice.

Most practitioners seem very dedicated to their individual practices, which is very nice. At a retreat land, however, it is essential to establish a strong relationship with the overall path of dharma. As individuals, we have the freedom to decide how to engage in practice; on the other hand, we have to look at the examples of the great teachers and bodhisattvas who really practiced in retreat and were able to generate the fruition of realization.



In today's times—with the transitions and changes occurring as dharma spreads through many parts of the world—the dharma is being practiced in many different ways. The shape and structure of how we relate to practice in the modern world is, at most, fifty years old. If we go back to the time of the Buddha or the time of Guru Rinpoche, we will find that the path of practice and the fruition generated from practice always came from long engagement with the dharma.

Look to the anecdotes and examples of bodhisattvas and great masters throughout history: those in our lineage prayers and practices, to whom we have great devotion. We never find them attempting realization halfheartedly. They never failed to practice—unlike so many of us—because they didn't have the time or were tired. You never find them saying "I tried my best," or "I'm happy with samsara and want the freedom to engage in that." You never find them engaging in the practice path part-time—and in that way, forfeiting realization.

The great masters whose examples we try to follow engaged in practice fully—body, speech, and mind. They were wholeheartedly dedicated to the path of practice, having changed their lives completely and spent much of their lives practicing in retreat.

There are the mahasiddhas who, having been born into the karmic world, purified all their negativities and accumulated vast merit. There are the great reincarnations or emanations of Vajradhara, Vajrasattva, Padmasambhava, Manjushri, and many great tertöns and realized masters. And there are the teachers we actually know, such as Kyabje Tsetrul Rinpoche, who spent much the better part of his life in retreat. His Holiness Mindrolling Trichen Rinpoche, our root guru, spent no less than nineteen years in retreat.

Let's say that you, yourself, were recognized as an emanation of Guru Rinpoche or Manjushri, that you held the title and were teaching, practicing, and leading great numbers. You might think that you wouldn't have to go into retreat; that your mind would already be able to balance samsara and nirvana. But despite being great emanations, our teachers still found it necessary to practice in retreat.

So while each one of you has your own life and responsibilities, meditators and practitioners have to understand the value and importance of retreat.

Dedicating One's Life to Retreat and Practice

Today some of you have come to a juncture in your lives where you have the very good fortune to be able to engage more in dharma and practice. Many of you have come to live on the land, to practice and become more involved in the sangha.

Tangentially, let me say that you all then come up with some very common questions about "my place" or "my role" in the sangha—which is a very wrong approach. If you have been entrusted with certain responsibilities, you serve as best you can if you wish to do so and if you are able to do so. This is very meritorious—but it is secondary. First of all, you are all practitioners. Your "place" in the sangha is as a retreatant and practitioner.

So, one group of people has come to the very fortunate time when you can not only be *inspired* by the examples of great masters, you can actually engage in following the aspiration you have held in your heart for so many years. If you are fortunate enough to now be able to do more practice and retreats, you need

to recognize the preciousness of this opportunity and dedicate your life to practice and retreats.

For a second group of people, this kind of life change may not be possible. You may have families and many other things you are responsible for. For this group the “urban retreats,” as we’re calling them, are very good. You should try to put much more effort into those. You should also select times to do short retreats: every three months, every year, or however often as you can, take time out to engage in intensive practice. This is very important.

For many years you have been listening to teachings, receiving numerous empowerments, studying on your own, and being blessed with the kindness and wisdom of many, many teachers. Now it is essential to really focus and begin to work with that—accurately, so there is no discrepancy between the view and meditation.

One danger that I’ve become more and more aware of is the great increase in intellectual knowledge of Dharma. You participate by becoming very good at verbally expressing the dharma to yourselves and others. But when the dharma is intellectualized and only expressed through speech, it may not be powerful enough to become the actual taste of experience—because the taste of experience is completely dependent on meditation.

To really meditate—to ponder, analyze, and actually experience—is essential. Whether you practice in lifelong retreat, urban retreats, or group retreats like this one, it is necessary to have a powerful foundation of extended intensive practice, to be able to truly merge your mind with the essence and meaning of dharma.

Being able to wholeheartedly retreat into dharma is a bit different than practicing in situations where you are busily engaged in other activities. Even if you do your various practices, recite mantra continuously through the day, do morning and evening prayers and aspirations, and engage as much as possible—these practices and contemplations are all being done while part of your mind’s attention is submerged in mundane activities. You may really try to be mindful and connect with the essence and meaning of the teachings. But realistically speaking, we all know how powerful our busy activities are, and how they draw our attention to themselves and submerge our concentration.

Trying to retain the meaning and essence of the dharma while being pulled in different directions is a constant struggle. While trying to make sense of the

dharma and the various methods for training our mind, we're also trying to make sense of everything else. This conflict makes all of us extremely tired. People say, "Oh, I'm so overwhelmed by dharma," or "I find dharma very difficult," or "It's too much for me."

It is not dharma practice that is overwhelming. It is the great conflict between dharma and the pull of our habitual tendencies, the pull of our busyness and long attachment to samsaric activities. When you're struggling like this, it is normal to feel very tired and overworked.

Sustaining this [struggle] makes our relationship with ignorance and samsara so strong and familiar, we tend to not avoid the display and pull of samsara. Of course—our basic mind being of the essence and wisdom—we may recognize this as being not the right condition or right thought. But we negate the message of wisdom. We are more inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to the pull of samsara, distraction, and ignorance—and to continue to blame dharma for not being relevant to our lives.

We may come to think that the Dharma is selfish, that the kinder thing is to respond in the moment to samsara. We then come up with all kinds of reasons for why the pull to samsara is so necessary.

This is how time passes—and how, with each year, the appearance of various troubles increase. This is our love-hate relationship with the Dharma. You know you love it, at the same time you can't love it. You know that samsara is nothing not a thing to love; at the same time you overextend yourself for it. This very difficult situation is one that I have been seeing for some time now.

At some point, you may break down completely, which is a very painful place to be. Recognizing this in my students—the older ones having directly experienced it and the younger ones knowing they may encounter it—I urge you to have a practical, direct, and dedicated relationship to the practice path.

Most of you are householders who may be struggling or feeling defeated. So it is very, very essential to allow yourselves the opportunity to have a much deeper experience of meditation. And when you go into what we call "retreat," it is essential to give yourself time to actually hear wholeheartedly what the intelligent mind recognizes through the teachings and the transmissions you've received.

At least in retreat, you are not faced with having to balance distractions and mundane activities with your devotion and love for dharma practice. Retreat, in this case, means taking some time—five days, a week, a few months—to retreat from that struggle between samsara and dharma.

When people say, “I do not have the financial resources or time to do retreats at Lotus Garden,” I completely understand. The demands of responsibilities and mundane activities are very strong. To actually manage to come to a place where you are not so susceptible to the magnetic pull of habitual tendencies and ordinary activities can be difficult. But it is important to give yourself that time, space, and quietude in an environment of intensive meditation.

To be alone, silent, and ready to go into intensive meditation and allow your mind to have a direct experience of samadhi—this calls for determination and concentration. Traditionally it is said that when you enter into retreat, you must determine, “Come what may, even in the face of death, I will not compromise my meditation. I will not be distracted, but engage wholeheartedly in the essence and meaning of dharma and realization.” With the intention to not compromise your determination, you enter into practice.

Skillful Methods to Recognize Primordial Nature

When you engage in intensive retreat practice, it is particularly important to know that your practice—be it formless meditation, ngöndro, yidam practice, shamatha, or any other meditation—is a very powerful skillful method to strengthen, protect, and guide you in what you are actually trying to do. In practice, you are actually giving yourself the chance to introduce yourself to your own primordial nature.

Your very core is spacious and vast. Within this sky-like expanse there is no form to see and no movement to engage in. Nothing is required and nothing comes or goes—since the basic nature requires no movement, nor any forms to be articulated by the sense activities. Completely free and unattached, it is beyond all sounds, forms, tastes, smells, textures, and thoughts that arise, abide, and cease. Free from *being* a sound, form, taste, smell, texture, or expression in thought, the basic nature is empty, like the sky.

Do not be deterred in your meditation by the endless activity of the senses. As long as we are alive, all the sense will be active. Go deeper, knowing that the core nature is absolutely expansive, quiet, and rested.

Out of the silence and discipline, you will be introduced to the primordial nature—and you will then understand the reason for all those practices and skillful methods.

Recognizing the Basic Nature The first point, as you pursue the various skillful methods, is to introduce yourself to the basic nature. Recognizing that the basic nature is not dependent on or postulated by the senses is the second point—where “recognizing” simply means telling yourself, “This is how it is. This is how the basic nature is.”

Recognizing “Big Deal” Sense Activities The second point is recognizing what a big deal we make of the forms we see, the sounds we hear, and the thoughts that occur in our minds. The problems and fears we think we have, our efforts and results, and everything that arises in the expansiveness of space—they all become such a big deal. If you would just let them be, there would be nothing more to it, because the core nature is not dependent on or bound by anything.

So look to see how much importance you conjure up around the senses, which have nothing to do with your core nature. See how much time you spend thinking, when there is really nothing to it. Recognize this, and—while still enjoying the shapes and forms in the sense fields—know that your core nature is not bound by or dependent on them.

To “recognize” this means to see how much importance you bring to sense activities, which have nothing to do with the core nature of mind. It means being able to say to yourself, “Look how much time and energy I spend thinking about my sense experiences. What a big deal I make of them and all their hopes and fears. While the core nature—which associates no value to whatever arises—remains untouched.”

Then you will realize that beyond the basic core nature of mind, nothing more is necessary or important. Recognizing this leads to the third state, which is usually called “wonderment.”

Recognizing as Wonderment As a yogi or meditator, when we see the contrast between what we think and what *is*, we are struck by how foolish we’ve been. Seeing all that we’ve made so important or tried to belittle, all the story lines and big dramas we’ve created from our mind’s inability to rest, we are

wonderstruck at how ignorant we have been. We are amazed at the stark contrast between the “nature as is” and everything that we conjure up, deliberate on, and create.

As a retreatant, you must work with this for the period of time you are in retreat.

The state of wonderment and amazement at all we create is in contrast to the simple nature that requires none of it to be understood. It is in this state that most yogis and mahasiddhas create great poetry. And it is in this state that most pointing out instructions, yogic dohas, and great poetry such as the songs of Milarepa belong. The great bodhisattvas, masters, and mahasiddhas—amazed by the ignorance of sentient beings unable to understand the simplicity of their own basic nature—have tried to point out through their teachings and compositions what the true nature is, and what the many immense causes of samsara are.

Wonderment at such contrast leads to the longing to sustain this state. And from the yearning to sustain the space and quietness of the basic nature arises the fourth state of recognition, “familiarization.”

Recognizing as Familiarity

At this point—just as you would try to protect the flame of a lamp by covering it with your hands—you want to protect the mind that sustains a state of equanimity, silence, and simplicity. You now long to familiarize yourself with your basic nature, to become more united with it. You also know the power of distractions that result from being immersed in the creation and unceasing attachment to sense activities. And you know that the winds of samsaric distractions and habitual patterns are strong enough to blow out the basic quietude and spaciousness of your fundamental nature.

So, from your heart you begin to pray, to supplicate, and to practice. These are the “hands” that protect the flame. The natural discipline of your prayers, supplications, and daily practice arises from a mind that recognizes how much it needs protection.

Having introduced yourself to unbroken equanimity and quietude, you must sustain it. When you really understand this, then inseparable samadhi and spaciousness will be truly virtuous and beneficial for everyone.

An analogy for this process might be the way each bead of your mala leads to the next bead, with each bead identical to the next—with a thread keeping them all together, without which you couldn’t even count the beads. In the same way—

having recognized your basic nature and its pervasiveness—you see how each moment enters the next, on the unbroken thread of familiarity with your basic nature.

To gain fluency and naturalness in abiding in the basic nature, your growing self-awareness must be bound with the thread of the practices and skillful methods entrusted to you. As one moment leads to the next, you meet each moment with introspection, research, and analysis.

Going deeper into your basic nature, you then realize that everything is “method.” Sitting and meditating is a method; not doing anything in particular is a method. All engaged activity and all virtue are methods, and all the mundane activities you engage in are methods.

Beyond that, your basic primordial nature is completely free, with no need of projections or deliberations to sustain it.

Building Confidence in Basic Nature

Confidence means seeing and knowing your own nature. As your confidence in tasting that basic nature builds, you no longer have to struggle with anything. The struggle of practice, the struggle of samsara, the attachment to samsara or to dharma—it all falls apart. The confidence of knowing your own basic nature makes you realize that everything you keep your mind busy with is actually just a projection, like a mirage or a dream.

And if these things are truly just mirage-like projections of your mind, why make them so very important? Basic nature doesn't survive or sustain itself on hope or fear. Hope is just a drama we create. And our fears—fear of our problems, fear of our inabilities, fear of not being better—are also just dramas we create. But we make these fears very solid, in the same way we make a big deal of the dream we had last night.

Basic nature has no fear and no need of it. The basic nature is openness, spaciousness: open and clear. It is only when we're foolish enough to make a mirage, a dream, or a storyline so very powerful that we succumb to distractions and ignorant mind. But a meditator must not fear the mind's conjuring up of ideas—because basic nature has no fear.

As you familiarize yourself with this in retreat, the natural confidence of the basic nature arises. As you sustain this unbroken chain of mindfulness and awareness, confidence in remaining inseparable from your basic nature increases. And gradually and naturally, all that you have conjured up—all the hopes, fears, and other distractions that have been made so important—decrease.

The natural results of gaining more confidence in the basic nature are nonattachment, awareness, nonaggression, and patience. It is also the ability to remain stable in all experiences, because basic nature is free from the mistaken view of thinking that projections are very important. Such depth of experience would be difficult to attain if every fifteen minutes or half-hour of every day you were in situations that demanded you make sense of them.

Daily life in the midst of samsara is always asking us to make hope and fear—which we call “responsibility”—very real. Hope and fear soon overtake the experience of basic nature. Trying to balance the two obstructs the path to enlightenment. This happens very easily in the midst of samsara and its various activities.

In retreat it is very different. You can sustain your experience of the basic nature without the constant pull to respond to the various distracting activities that are the causes of hopes and fears. Retreat is the time for someone such as you to sustain the basic nature a bit more.

Irreversible Confidence

Until you are able to sustain the glimpse of your basic nature, a lack of confidence will always make it difficult to contend with attachment and grasping.

Where attachment is strong and you are unable to cut through it—no matter how much hard work you do, and how much love and devotion you have to the path of practice—an unceasing stream of causes will continue to stem from hope and fear. And even though you *wish* to be free of samsara, these causes will create a stream of dilemmas that will keep you in samsara.

Retreat is important because it is the only way to sustain your confidence. With stronger and stronger confidence—and with more time, more protection, and a foundation for sustaining it—you have the possibility of not getting pulled in by the powerfully magnetic call to make hope and fear so very real.

So following in the footsteps of our great teachers, practice well and correctly in retreat. Along with this, really commit to doing retreats, not just this year but in the years to come. In this way, you will deepen your understanding of dharma; and the seeds of the many teachings and transmissions that have been planted in your minds will have a chance to be cared for and nurtured.

The fruition of irreversible confidence in your own basic nature will truly bring about realization for yourselves and freedom from samsara for all sentient beings. So I am very, very happy that you are dedicating yourselves to the path of practice.

I am fully aware of the practical difficulties you all have. Samsara is not easy; we all know that. You have been fighting with it and struggling to sustain it for so long. Now, I think a bit more hard work is needed for something as valuable as realization of the meaning of dharma. Of course, you all *do* work hard—and have done and will continue to do so. And for that effort, I am very, very appreciative.

I hope the remainder of your retreat is without obstacles, and that after retreat you can sustain the experience until entering your next retreat. With hopes and prayers, I wish you well and look forward to seeing you then. Practice sincerely and in this way, engage. Then the tremendous power of the prayers of the teachers will truly lead your mind to fruition, the essence of dharma, which is enlightenment.

With all my love and all my good wishes, I'm going to say goodbye for now.

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