

Commentary on Ngöndro Practice according to The New Treasure of Dudjom

Düd jom ter sar ngön drö ngag dön dü pa zhug



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Padma Shugchang
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FORWARD

Homage to the gracious root teacher, who embodies the masters of the three lineages. Please pour down a shower of blessings.

Buddha Shakyamuni, the supreme, unequalled teacher, taught the Dharma on many different levels. The teaching most essential, accesible, and easy to practice is the ngöndro, or preliminary practice. Patrul Rinpoche, the great scholar and siddha, said that even though it is called “preliminary practice”, there is no other practice which is more profound than ngöndro. Many great masters of antiquity accomplished the primordial wisdom of enlightenment through this secret and profound path.

The ngöndro presented here originated as a terma of Dudjom Lingpa. Later, it was written down with technical clarification by his succeeding reincarnation, H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche, Jigdral Yeshe Dorje, prophesied by Guru Rinpoche himself as his own regent, and renowned as the sun and moon. Through his unlimited transmission, initiations and pith instructions as well as historical background, all of which, like a potent seed, will mature in our minds and liberate us.

Therefore, this ngöndro is one of his teachings that we receive which is full of blessings and power. Among its many different versions, this one, being highly condensed, is especially suitable for our busy modern times. By taking support of a foundation practice such as this, all our dharma practice can result in our realization of the primordial wisdom, and all the great lineage masters will be our witness. Therefore, we should accept this practice with joy, respect and appreciation.

*Through the power of this virtue
May the Vajrayana teachings of the ancient translation school endure
May the life force of all the noble lineage holders remain firm
and their activities increase;
May the world be free of disease, famine, war, and natural disasters,
and be filled with love and joy and peace;
May a golden age be upon us, and all beings swiftly attain enlightenment.*

Khenchen Palden Sherab Rinpoche
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❧ INTRODUCTION

Today, I am going to talk about Ngöndro and the related practices. This is truly the essence of all the different teachings of the Buddha, from the Hinayana up to the great Dzogchen teachings. Ngöndro Practice contains the heart teachings of all those levels. This technique was condensed by the great tantric master, Guru Padmasambhava. He arranged it in such a way that any student can apply and practice every single teaching of the Buddha towards the discovery of inner wisdom, the realization of enlightenment.

The Buddha Shakyamuni came to this world over two thousand five hundred and thirty-eight years ago. After his enlightenment at age thirty-five, he taught for forty-five years, offering many levels of instruction relative to individual capacities, and opening the door to great awakening for anyone interested in accomplishing the highest good for themselves as well as all others. All of the Buddha's teachings lead to the realization of Buddhahood and can be generally divided into two categories: the philosophical systems and methods of practical application.

Buddhist philosophical views are as deep as the ocean and boundless as the sky. The philosophical traditions include many branches such as Sravakayana or Hinayana, Mahayana, Mind Only School, Madhyamika tradition, the Vajrayana lineages and others. These schools are all concerned with the true meaning of experience and accurate descriptions of phenomenal transformations, such as how everything is constantly changing and working together in interdependence.

However, philosophy itself is only a prelude to practice. Effective inquiry and analysis lead to meaningful application. The Buddha wasn't trying to create an intellectual society or an academic system. He was intent on communicating the ultimate state of our true nature. Philosophy has a necessary function and serves to exercise our inner wisdom so that we can begin to understand; however, this level of knowledge alone will not lead to the fullness of enlightenment or the ultimate realization of love, compassion, wisdom and joy. Great equanimity and transcendent insight never come through intellectual pursuits alone.

The ngöndro practice is a condensed form of the entire Dharma expounded by the Buddha, including the teachings of Guru Padmasambhava and many other lineage masters. Nothing has been left out. The ngöndro encompasses all of the essentials which lead to enlightenment and the actualization of this practice is of great benefit for everyone. It is a skillful method, an easy way to apply the views clarified by philosophical inquiries into mind and life, so that these understandings can transform our activities. As we practice, our interest and devotion quite naturally awaken, encouraging us to deeper commitment. In this way, we can have a direct connection with the core of our true nature, a practical means of embodying profound love, genuine compassion, perfect wisdom and joy. Ngöndro practice will ground our body, speech and mind in the true nature so that we can begin to mature the two benefits. It is of vital importance for those who seek enlightenment.

To take up the ngöndro, you must become familiar with the actual practice. Beyond learning about the form and meaning, we must know how to implement it. Without that knowledge, mere interest will not actualize the fullness of the ultimate result. Therefore, it is necessary to know how to practice. Ngöndro introduces us to the Vajrayana methods; it is full of insight, inspiration and subtle instructions which tell us

exactly how to apply ourselves. This form has been handed down through generations of great masters, so it is not as though we have to struggle and create something new. This is a well-established highway and if you simply follow the signs, you can begin moving with confidence and joy. This highway goes directly there. Many accomplished masters, both male and female, arrived at the final destination and discovered their Buddha nature in this way. So it is said to be rich with inspirational advice and pith instructions. Hence, there is no need to hesitate, take detours or make u-turns. Just go ahead, joyfully. This is how the precious lineage teachings have been continually preserved in unbroken succession. We too, can adopt the ngöndro as our practice to develop the necessary courage, commitment and inspiration as we work toward our own enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

☞ THE NINE YANAS

'Yana' is Sanskrit for vehicle. In the Nyingma Schools they list nine yanās or vehicles of practice. The first three are known as the Sravakayana, the Pratyekabuddhayana and the Bodhisattvayana. These three are known as the causal yanās [*S. hetuyana*]. The other six yanās are all Vajrayana teachings or tantras. The three outer tantras are called Kriyayoga, Upayoga and Yogatantra. They are known as the three external tantrayanas. The three inner tantras are Mahayoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga. Atiyoga, Mahasandhi and Dzogchen are synonyms: one meaning, different names. These six tantric teachings are known together as the fruition or result yanās [*S. phalayana*].

Guru Padmasambhava's clothes symbolize these nine yana teachings. I am sure you have noticed that he is wearing many different robes. This doesn't mean he felt very cold in Tibetan weather and would wear whatever he could find. Everything that he wears is a symbol of these different teachings. According to Dzogchen and the Nyingma lineage of Guru Padmasambhava, we are not to discriminate against any of the teachings. All are either support, ornamentation, or part of the Dzogchen teaching. Don't reject any of these saying, "Oh, that is just Hinayana, that is only a Bodhisattvayana practice, that is merely an outer tantrayana exercise. I don't care about that, I don't need any of this, because I only practice Dzogchen." That is not the right way to look at it.

All of those teachings are like the ornamentation, or branches of Dzogchen, as in one tree. Dzogchen is the fruit, but all the other teachings support the highest branches of the tree. Every one of the practices in those vehicles helps to remove obscurations and reveal our enlightened nature. For example, Hinayana teachings are a support for the Mahayana teachings and Sutra Mahayana teachings are a support for the Vajrayana teachings. The three outer tantras are a support for the three inner tantras. It is like a staircase where the first step supports the second, the first and second support the third and the rest. Every one of those teachings is a support for the Dzogchen transmission. Therefore, we should accept them all and we should not reject some out of hand, thinking we are superior practitioners. "I don't need that," is a wrong attitude.

☞ THE MEANING

Ngöndro is a word made of two parts: *ngön* and *dro*. In Tibetan, *ngön* means ahead or before and *dro* means going. Sometimes it is translated as "preliminary," but that is not an exact translation. It's more like going before or going forward. When you're traveling with a group in new territory, there's often a guide who helps out by bringing news of what's ahead. Similarly, our path must be guided by wisdom. Anyone who wants to get enlightened should "go ahead" and practice the ngöndro.

Many people tend to think that ngöndro practice is just an appetizer, or a pre-

school for beginners, but this is not the case. At this point, you must start to comprehend the importance of the ngöndro. Even though there are more advanced practices, there's nothing more essential and necessary than what we encounter right here. These practices not only allow us to go ahead and begin; they are also essential in the middle of the path as well as after the goal has been reached. To take up the ngöndro ensures that the whole endeavor is fully spiritual, qualified Dharma practice.

☞ THE BENEFIT

Ngöndro practice will help us develop confidence and joy in our efforts to become enlightened for the sake of all beings. By applying the practices and understanding the meaning of the words, you feel inspired and encouraged. You become more aware of how valuable this opportunity is. We've all inherited the Buddha seed, everyone of us. The ngöndro practices help us appreciate this in ourselves as well as in others. A new understanding begins to take root as our obscurations are gradually purified, giving rise to the wisdom which recognizes all beings as equals. Everyone has an opportunity to work joyfully and courageously for their own as well as other's enlightenment. Diligent application of this practice will totally remove deep-seated karmic obscurations and neurotic habit-patterns acquired in this life, while simultaneously revealing our Buddha nature.

☞ THE TREASURE

There have been many ngöndro practices revealed by great masters and tertons. They all follow a similar structure although their length varies. This particular version of the ngöndro practice is very condensed. It was revealed by His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, a great terton and the head of the Nyingma school, who passed away in 1987. The text is based on works revealed by his predecessors with some technical instructions added by His Holiness. It is an especially good practice for this busy generation.

☞ THE SECTIONS

I: The Four Reflections which Reverse the Mind

II: The Actual Preliminaries

- A) *Going for Refuge*
- B) *The Generation of Bodhicitta*

III: The Accumulation of Merit: *Mandala Offering*

IV: The Purification of Obscurations: *Vajrasattva*

V: *The Swiftly Penetrating Blessings of the Guru Yoga*

VI: The Transference (*Phowa*)

VII: *Chöd Practice and Dedication Prayers*

The actual preliminaries are preceded by the four renunciations. These are also known as the four reversals which turn the mind toward the Dharma. Contemplating the meaning of each of these statements is a powerful technique which can change our attitude toward samsara and clarify our understanding of the phenomenal world. These four thoughts are generally associated with the Hinayana teachings, and in particular, they correspond to the Four Noble Truths which the Buddha Shakyamuni first taught to five human students, 80,000 celestial beings and many animals, in a small park on the outskirts Varanasi, India 2500 years ago.

The Buddha explained that in order to be liberated, you must understand the

nature of suffering. Pain and suffering are never random or accidental; there is always a cause. Everyone would like to be liberated from suffering, but to do so we must first look into its origins. To recognize and remove the cause of suffering one must have a reliable method. This is called the path. The path indicated by the Buddha leads us beyond suffering into the joy, peace and love, of nirvana. Understand the causes of suffering, then follow the path and you will attain nirvana.

The four noble truths consist of:

1. suffering
2. the cause of suffering
3. nirvana
4. the cause of nirvana, which is also known as the path

On the basis of these truths, we can develop insight into our feelings and individual experiences so that complete realization becomes possible.

The next section is the refuge. Going for refuge is the primary condition for practice and begins the preliminaries. Without it there's no growth or true realization of the profound meaning. After taking refuge, the focus turns to developing bodhicitta. This is a term indicating the mind of infinite love, compassion and wisdom in relation to all beings, oneself included.

Mandala offering is the third section of the ngöndro. There are many different varieties of mandala, but in this case we are making what is called an offering mandala. We visualize, meditate, and then present imaginary offerings to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The fourth section focuses on the Buddha Vajrasattva. This practice purifies obscurations and removes obstacles.

The fifth part in this sequence involves practicing guru yoga on Guru Padmasambhava. See him as the embodiment of all of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and as a skillful display of the Three Jewels. To feel the presence of Guru Padmasambhava and practice on merging with him is known as guru yoga.

The sixth section is related to the transference of consciousness, the *phowa* practice. This does not mean that we need to effect transference at this time, but we're preparing for that inevitable moment when the mind will separate from the body. At that point this practice will enable us to easily transfer our consciousness to the pure land of the Buddha Amitabha. [*T. bde wa chen*]

The last part of the ngöndro is called the charity of the body. This is a very brief *chöd* practice combined with the dedication of merit. These are the seven sub-divisions of the ngöndro.

✧ ALIGNMENTS

The ngöndro is a complete practice which embodies the whole of the Buddha's teachings. This is very useful because every word that the Buddha taught had a reason and purpose relating directly to the recognition and transcendence of all possible states of mind and emotion, both gross and subtle. These practices give us the power and confidence to recognize and release each emotion. In this way we can begin to purify

and transform the mind until our Buddha nature is completely revealed. Our understanding becomes more powerful and profound, and the view more vast and spacious. There is no need to limit ourselves to a single method. The Buddha offers us many different techniques which all work toward the same end: they either remove, purify, or transform the emotions. Of course, these methods must be applied relative to our capabilities.

If you can, practice the ngöndro in the early morning. That's how most great masters did it. If that's not convenient, don't be discouraged; just find a time when you can fit it in. Do it at midnight rather than skip it.

When you practice, sit comfortably on a cushion (or chair) so that you can relax your body. Be quiet and calm your mind. Stop all discursive thinking, just let thoughts be and dissolve in their own place, wherever that is. Disengage. Don't dwell on the past or think about the future and don't follow your current thoughts. Let the mind be. Do not try to work with the thoughts themselves; leave them on the side. Keep awareness in the present moment. This is referred to as a state of freshness. This momentary, instant state of the mind is the most precious condition. In Dzogchen, it is called "the primordial mind, the originally pure, naked mind." It is free of obscurity, and undisturbed by emotions or thoughts.

From that crystal clear mind, love and compassion for all sentient beings arise spontaneously and unceasingly, filling one with joy, respect and appreciation for the preciousness of our situation, for the gifts of the teacher, the teachings, and many other things.

All of this has not come about by accident. Everything has causes and supportive conditions, everything has a reason. This beautiful moment of experience is not arbitrary and meaningless; therefore, we should look into the deeper meaning, learn to appreciate the way it is, and have respect for others. This is very important. So sit down, relax and cultivate this awareness for one or two minutes before you begin.

Reflect on the preciousness of the teaching, the teacher, and the lineage until you feel tremendous devotion. This warm feeling of closeness is indispensable: Buddha often said that devotion is the door to enlightenment. Without devotion, realization and enlightenment will not develop. Devotion consists of love, compassion and inspiration, all joined together. It is not based in hope and belief; you actually learn to value this view and are able to make good use of the teaching situation. Practice without devotion is like trying to drink from a tea-strainer; everything good passes through and one is left with nothing but the old leaves. Devotion, love, and compassion, inspiration, closeness and warmth of feeling are extremely important. They help us overcome any obstacles and bring forth our best qualities, the essential attitudes necessary to become enlightened and realize benefits for others. True devotion is completely the opposite of the tea-strainer, it catches everything good and thoroughly removes what we don't need.

Love, joy, the power of inspiration and many more beautiful qualities are unified and perfectly reflected in the form of Guru Padmasambhava. Guru Padmasambhava is the embodiment of the wisdom, love and compassion of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Their essence is integrated and displayed in the form of Guru Padmasambhava, even as he historically existed. Guru Padmasambhava represents all true masters, and anyone with whom you have felt this kind of connection. He symbolizes all the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha, and in the higher tantras, the

guru, deva and dakinis.

Guru Padmasambhava appears seated in front of you in the posture of royal relaxation, bright with the energy of love, compassion, wisdom and divine inspiration. His body radiates with the power of blessings in the form of the five wisdom lights (white, yellow, red, blue and green, or multiple lights). This is the luminosity of love and compassion, the all-pervading light of perfect wisdom, which removes all obscurations and instantly awakens the Buddha nature of every single sentient being, transforming the whole universe into the pure land, a state of total love, compassion and wisdom. Open yourself, feel the power of these radiations and let this blissful awareness deepen. Guru Padmasambhava is surrounded by many buddhas and bodhisattvas, both male and female, or as they are referred to in the tantras, dakas and dakinis. They are all here, right in front of us, smiling, blissful, radiant and ready to assist us on our journey, encouraging us to explore our Buddha nature.

With an awareness of their presence, begin to chant:

NAMO! LU MED TEN GYI GONPO LAMA KHYEN

Homage lama, infallible constant protector, (you who) know!

🌀FIRST: The Preparation—

The Recitation of the Four Reflections which Reverse the Mind

The Tibetan word *khyen* is often translated as you who know, and sometimes as “you who are aware,” or “you who watch,” but actually it means, “Please, watch over me, help me, regard me. You know my motivation, my inspiration, my bodhicitta commitment, so help me to explore my Buddha nature and fulfill my visions and wishes.” That’s the basic meaning of “you who know.” *gonpo lama* means “infallible, constant protector.” The condensed ngöndro contains all of this in one line, but many longer forms of this prayer exist. In Tibet, it is called *Lama Jang Bö* [T. *rgyang ‘bod*] which means “Calling the Lama from Afar.” We call on the lama to help guide and assist us in removing obscurations and revealing our Buddha nature so that we may attain Buddhahood for the sake of all living beings.

The next four lines are called the four renunciations or the four attitudes which turn the mind from samsara toward the dharma. These four statements express a clear understanding of the nature of samsara.

DAL JOR DI NI SHIN TU NYED PAR KA

The freedoms and favorable conditions are extremely difficult to obtain.

This line refers to the special qualities and endowments of this unique human rebirth. The Tibetan *dal jor* has many explanations in the philosophical teachings. Eighteen specific qualities make our present condition very, very precious. It is said that a body endowed with these eighteen qualities is extremely rare and difficult to obtain. Among these, there are eight freedoms: not having been born in hell, not being a hungry ghost or an animal, not having taken birth as a long-lived god. According to the Buddha, there are many levels of the god realm and although they all tend to have extremely long lives, their minds are very dull. They hibernate beyond sensation where there’s nothing to do, as if they were convalescing in a nursing home. Very little

progress or change happens in that environment. Their lives go on for ages but such a situation is not that useful for spiritual growth, so we don't want to be born in that realm. We have not taken birth as savages, nor are we dominated by many negative, violent actions. Finally, we have the good fortune of being free of serious physical or mental handicaps such as muteness or imbecility.

Then there's the ten luxuries or favorable conditions: to be born as a human being, with all your critical faculties, to be free of extreme views, to be in a place where the teaching is available, to have an interest in and devotion to the dharma. These five luxuries are associated with oneself. Five more are related to external conditions: the Buddha has been here, he gave teachings which still remain, there are practitioners following the path and a teacher is available.

Together, the eight freedoms and ten favorable conditions comprise the eighteen precious qualities associated with this human rebirth. Such an opportunity is not easy to come by. Actually, it's very special. The verse reads, "The freedoms and favorable conditions are extremely difficult to obtain." Consider how precious life is and learn to respect and appreciate the present. This situation didn't arise by accident; all these beautiful qualities, opportunities and freedoms are not just abstractions, or easily acquired. Of course we are all familiar with the relative difficulties of life, but overall, every one of us has plenty of good reasons to feel joyful and happy, to appreciate the preciousness of our situation. We are surrounded by so many beautiful things.

First we have to recognize that such good fortune is difficult to come by, then we have to appreciate and value this opportunity in a meaningful way. Simply to be aware of this is not enough. We have to use this precious occasion as the cause for an even greater result.

The second line is:

KYE TSHED MI TAG CHI WAI CHO CHAN YIN

Everything born is impermanent and bound to die.

Consider the precious gift of this human body and the special opportunities it represents. How long is it going to last? There's no guarantee or certainty about it. Everything in this world is constantly shifting and changing. This is called impermanence. Movement and change are the natural law pervading the whole phenomenal universe. The sun and moon, our inner state, and everything external, from galaxies to the cells of your body, is in constant motion and incessantly changing. It never stops, not even for one second. If it did, there would be a big disaster; or maybe a surprise so great we couldn't handle it. Understand that the nature of all phenomena is impermanence. This is very important to contemplate.

While you still have a precious human body, it is yours to do with as you will. You have to bring the bright light of clear vision into play. Be aware of the value of this moment. You have all your functions and basically, you can do what you want to. Before things have changed too much and the circumstance degenerates, learn to use this life for a greater purpose. Make these endowments the cause for a higher result.

Awareness of impermanence is important for our own peace of mind, so we aren't shocked when things change. Through observation and contemplation, we are able to see how change is natural. This applies to everything. If we understand that

change and movement are the law, we can accept what is happening and not be neurotically obsessed with false explanations. Reality is right in front of us, in each and every one of our experiences. You don't have to be a sophisticated physicist to understand this, you don't have to be a highly realized master, it's right here all of the time, immediately in front of us. This is good to know and good to reveal.

The visual representation of the [Wheel of Life](#) depicting the six realms surrounded by the twelve links comprising the system of interdependent coordination was actually designed by the Buddha Shakyamuni. He asked his disciples to paint this illustration on the wall outside the temples so that everyone would always be aware of our situation. The wheel is always turning, it constantly moves, it is not locked or fixed in place. The outer rim is grasped by a three-eyed monster who represents impermanence. Through the Buddha's metaphor, we can see how everything and everybody is subject to change, without any exceptions.

“Everything that is born...” Another way to put it is that everything which appears is impermanent and bound to change. This can be understood generally or in particular. Everything is constantly changing and moving in time and space. By understanding that our human body is difficult to obtain, we learn to appreciate and value it because it is not going to stay like this forever. Things are not even the same from one moment to the next. We will eventually come to the end of our present situation and move on to another state. Everything is always in flux and flowing, moving and shifting.

The third line reads:

GE DIG LE KYI GYU DRE LU WA MED

The results of virtuous and unvirtuous actions are inexorable.

To help us understand the relation between causes, conditions and their results, the Buddha taught the law of karma. Karma is a Sanskrit word meaning action. Whatever you see in this world, whether it is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, has particular causes and supportive conditions which have led to its present manifestation. Hence good action results in goodness and bad deeds yield negative results. Nothing appears without causes and conditions and the systematic relation between causes and effects is known as karma.

When we study natural systems, we can clearly discern how the principle of karma operates on the relative, phenomenal level. The continuity of the cause does not alter, change or lose its original energy. It maintains an identity and the integrity of the pattern never changes. Seed from sweet fruit will continue to produce sweet fruit. If the seed is from bitter fruit, you can be sure it will still be bitter when it ripens. If the seed is a cross of sweet and sour together, the fruit will be similar. If it's from red fruit, the new fruit will be red. Like these flowers here; if you replant their seeds in good soil and water them, you will soon see a similar color and shape appear once again. So the nature of karma never really changes; it inevitably has its way in ordering the transformations and changes which come about in the world. The rhythm and echo of past actions are communicated and extended throughout the generations across centuries of time.

The karmic system never fails or gets things mixed up. If you plant iris bulbs, these will not produce roses! This continuity is reflected in the pattern of our minds: positive seeds bring positive results, negative seeds bring negative harvests. Actions performed in love give rise to more love, angry vibrations bring about more anger. A joyful effort gives rise to more joy. Similar rhythms continue endlessly from beginningless time, throughout the aeons. The law of karma is very profound, steady and continuous. We don't have to get abstract and philosophical to understand this, we can actually see these workings displayed in the world, in simple patterns which are easily observed. Similarly, if we promote more love with this mind, we will realize more love. Love means joy, peace, and happiness; if we are more compassionate, it will be easier to relax, to be calm and peaceful. Therefore the great masters have taught that in order to realize joy, peace and happiness for ourselves as well as for all other sentient beings, we must learn to be loving and compassionate. If we love others, we will receive love ourselves. The quality of the energy we send out echoes back and forth. If we are angry, we are planting seeds for more discomfort and irritation. If we give love, we will receive love.

Whatever you do will reflect back to you. The effects never miss the target. They will not come to me. Whatever you do, you alone will experience. The effects will not be experienced by the elements or by any other people. No one will experience what you do aside from yourself, even if it takes a hundred million years; sooner or later it will echo back to you in the form of experience. Therefore you must be aware of the value of positive activity and create good causes and conditions. This recognition of impermanence is the subject of the third phrase used to turn the mind toward the Dharma.

The fourth line in Tibetan is:

KHAM SUM KHOR WA DUG NGAL GYA TSHOI NGANG

The three realms of cyclic existence have the nature of an ocean of suffering.

In samsara there is no ultimate satisfaction. Perfect happiness cannot be obtained by manipulating or optimizing conditions. Guru Padmasambhava compared efforts to attain worldly happiness with the scratching of a leper; although it seems to promise relief, it only opens more wounds and gives rise to more itching and bleeding. Whatever we acquire or experience in this world offers no final satisfaction or lasting comfort. Even if it appears to be the best of objects or situations, there will be some unanticipated aspect of it which does not meet up to our vision and turns everything upside-down. This does not imply something negative about you or others, it is just the nature of samsara. There's always a measure of dissatisfaction and discomfort in the conditional world because everything's constantly changing. It never stops. Our attachments and clinging result in suffering, misery and all the other trouble that arises. Misfortunes follow one after another. This is part of life in samsara and not just some aberration, for such problems are part of our everyday reality. The abhidharma teachings list eleven different types of suffering. Among those are three root forms known as the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and all-pervasive suffering. Contemplation of the four reversals is the primary means of gaining a clear understanding of the suffering which creates samsara, without resorting to abstract reasoning, logic and philosophical arguments. Rather, we see, know, and feel the truth of the situation before us. This clarity is the path itself. Therefore it is sometimes called "clearly knowing the image of samsara, both externally and internally."

These four thoughts describe all that we have, and offer a critical awareness of the conditional world. This knowledge will give us a better understanding of samsara, so that we're not just taken in by appearances. These thoughts develop our insight into the nature of the whole world. In the teachings they say you must accept whatever arises and continue to move on courageously as part of the game. Learn how to work well with your situation and carry on in the spirit of bodhicitta. Maintain a deep commitment to the practice to realize benefits for both yourself and all other beings.

The last line reads:

DRAN NE DAG LO CHO LA GYUR WAR SHOG

Remembering this may my mind turn towards the Dharma.

Through deepening our comprehension of the meaning of these four verses, we can begin to practice the Dharma effectively, which means cultivating good causes and conditions, and initiating positive resonances which will echo throughout time and space, not merely for ourselves but for every living being. This is a request for inspiration and support, beseeching the kindness of the lama, the buddhas and bodhisattvas, so that we may benefit all beings. "May my mind, body and speech be totally transformed, may I realize myself as non-separate from the Dharma."

The four reversals constitute the first stage of the ngöndro practice. Now we'll move on to the refuge.

☞ **SECOND: The Actual Preliminary Practice:**

☞ **A. Going for Refuge**

In order to explore our Buddha nature and begin the journey toward enlightenment, you must understand the meaning of taking refuge. To take refuge daily is the most essential practice of all schools of Buddhism.

The Tibetan word for refuge is *skyabs* which actually means having a sense of closeness, full confidence, a warm feeling and trusting attitude toward the Buddha, his teaching and those who are devoted to making the teaching a living experience.

In the ngöndro practice we recite the refuge vow right after chanting the four thoughts which clarify the nature of samsara; in the light of this understanding, we take refuge. The Indian Dzogchen master Vimalamitra said, "Knowing clearly the situation in samsara as well as the qualities of enlightened beings, we can go for refuge." First we must know the nature of samsara. There is nothing here we can rely on, take comfort in or plan to stay with. Everything is always changing and moving. Troubles follow one after another continuously, as if you're in a tunnel which you have to dig by hand. Discouraged by the situation, the mind becomes unstable. In the face of this, we learn to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. This has many levels of meaning, but the act of going for refuge should always be accompanied by a feeling of closeness, warmth, and confidence. That's the basic nature of taking refuge.

Love, faith and a sense of intimacy in relation to the Three Jewels open us to their influences which are of great assistance in removing our obscurations. Ignorance,

attachment, anger, jealousy, doubt and pride are all obstacles which create uncomfortable situations for us throughout our lives. We must work to remove, transform, or purify them: we can't just leave them like they are. They are the source of all our difficulties, bringing imbalances and troubles constantly. We have to look at them and deal with them. On the external level we can call on experts, people who can really help us change, those who have trod the path. All the buddhas and bodhisattvas were originally the same as we are. They were not higher or lower than normal sentient beings. However, through their extraordinary motivation, courage, commitment, and joyful efforts, they have become free of all negative emotions and mental obscurations, revealed their Buddha nature, and realized total enlightenment. When we seek assistance on the relative level, the buddhas have the knowledge and skills to purify our emotions and solve our problems so that we may become like them. That is the external aspect of taking refuge.

What is the nature of the Buddha? The Buddha nature is totally enlightened, completely free of all obscurations and habit patterns, radiant with love and compassion, and full of wisdom. That reality is known as the Buddha. When you are liberated from emotions, and are without mental obscurations, you are already naturally loving, compassionate and wise. These qualities are inherent in our being, as the Buddha clearly demonstrated. Buddhahood is not some novelty which the Buddha developed. He became enlightened through the destruction of all fetters and obstacles. That is the meaning of Buddha.

The Dharma is the method or body of techniques which help us awaken true love, genuine compassion and wisdom free from ego-clinging and neurotic games. Universal, unconditional love, selfless compassion, and transcendent wisdom pervade all samsaric beings, no matter their situation. The dharmic point of view is without divisions into higher or lower, close or distant. Everyone has the Buddha nature, everyone needs love, compassion and wisdom and nobody enjoys being subject to anger, jealousy, pride, pain and so on. This knowledge is called the Dharma. It is a message of freedom which offers us techniques to purify all obscurations and totally reveal the ultimate state of the Buddha nature, the perfection of love, compassion, wisdom and peace.

The Sangha refers to those who practice the Dharma, who carry it in their hearts and minds, applying it according to their capabilities, joyfully, with courage and commitment. Some sangha members have a high degree of love, compassion and wisdom and some are only beginners, but all are motivated toward enlightenment, dedicated to the realization of benefits for all sentient beings. Also, the sangha can take the form of an individual who has some realization and begins to share and inspire other beings. That too is sangha. These companions serve as a source of inspiration and joy, setting examples for others to follow on the path toward enlightenment.

In English:

I take refuge in the Buddha
I take refuge in the Dharma
I take refuge in the Sangha

In Sanskrit:

Buddham saranam gacchami
Dharmam saranam gacchami

Sangham saranam gacchami

In Tibetan:

Sangye la kyab su chi-o
Chö la kyab su chi-o
Gendun la kyab su chi-o

The objects of refuge are the Three Jewels or the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Who is taking refuge? Individuals are motivated to take refuge on the basis of their own interest, feeling of warmth, closeness, and confidence in the Three Jewels. No one can be pressured or forced into taking refuge. It only happens through individual joyful effort, by opening your heart and mind to the Buddha as your teacher, the Dharma as your path and the Sangha as your community of spiritual friends. That's the true meaning of taking refuge and the way we should perceive the Three Jewels. We take refuge out of love for the teacher, the teaching and our companions. By means of this endeavor, we begin to explore and reveal our Buddha nature.

How long will we take refuge? Until we are enlightened. At that point, we will no longer need to take refuge externally. We'll actually embody the objects of refuge. The notion of taking refuge is transcended when you become enlightened. That's the general meaning of taking refuge as defined in the Buddha's teachings.

In the special terminology employed in the Vajrayana, the inner objects of refuge are called the guru, deva and dakini or the *lama*, *yidam* and *khandro* and are referred to as the Three Roots. According to the inner tantra, we can distinguish three levels; externally we take refuge in the Three Jewels, internally we take refuge in the Three Roots and secretly we take refuge in the *rtsa*, *rlung* and *thig-le*, or the channels, winds and essence elements of the body.

To unite subject and object requires effort, so you must generate some activity when going for refuge in the most external sense. However, from the Dzogchen point of view, there is what is known as "refuge without effort." This is also known as the ultimate or most secret object of refuge which is to take refuge within one's own true nature of mind, to abide in the union of emptiness and clarity. To do this, we need a sense of being very close to the objects of refuge and to feel the energy of love and happiness in that relationship.

As sentient beings, we do not live in harmony with our original nature. Having wandered for a long time in samsara, we are unfamiliar with the truth. Enamored by our projections, we do not have much insight into our own mental events. Through actions based in dualism we separate ourselves from the true nature and become confused and deluded. In one way, taking refuge is returning to your own home, to the essence of who you really are, so you can learn how to be at ease here. Of course you can come and go as you please, it's just that you've finally arrived at your permanent address. Knowing where you live inspires great confidence and joy, freedom beyond doubt and the cycle of hopes and fears. You have realized the ultimate state of democracy!

This is the prayer to say when you take refuge:

DI ZUNG CHANG CHUB NYING PO MA THOB BAR
LAMA KON CHOG SUM LA KYAB SU CHI

**From now until attaining the heart of enlightenment,
I take refuge in the Lama and the Three Jewels.**

Initially, the objects of refuge appear to be external. This is the ground and foundation. At first we need to get oriented on the ground, the earth; then we can begin to move. Do not just gaze off into the sky. We must learn to combine the realities of the sky and earth together; we cannot just deal with one half of the world. If you fixate on the sky you will stumble and hurt your self.

Taking refuge is important. All of the Buddha's teachings are contained within the practice of taking refuge. What exactly did the Buddha teach? All his teachings relate directly to the realities of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The whole teaching is subsumed by these three topics! The Three Jewels are the embodiment of his entire communication. It is necessary to open ourselves with joy and confidence, to make an intimate, heartfelt connection with the objects of refuge, and then maintain this bond throughout all our daily activities.

The great master Atisha came to Tibet around the 11th century. Externally, his foremost practice was taking refuge. He recited the refuge formula all of the time and offered this teaching to many Tibetans. Because he chanted these lines constantly, many people thought this was all he knew. So they called him the Refuge Teacher. But long before Atisha came to Tibet, he already understood all of the Buddha's teachings. Moreover, he knew many of the sciences of his time. He was the headmaster of Vikramashila monastic university which was like a twin to Nalanda. Given all of that, why did he focus on the refuge? Because he was fully aware of its importance in firmly establishing sentient beings on the ground of practice. Therefore, in communicating with the Tibetan people, Atisha emphasized the supreme virtue of taking refuge.

Another famous Tibetan master who lived around the 15th century, was a renowned Nyingma yogi whose name was Grub-thob Than-stong rGyalpo whose name means "the king of empty land." Having constructed one hundred and eight iron bridges spanning big rivers throughout Tibet, he was also known as the "Iron Bridge Builder." Modern scientists have investigated his work and believe that he was the first man to build iron bridges on such a scale. He was also a famous tertön, who sported a long white beard and top-knot. He is depicted holding a vase and an iron chain in his right hand. Nobody knows how he was paid or what sort of techniques he used, but the bridges have not rusted, and some of these structures are still in use. Even the communist regime has expressed their appreciation of his efforts, citing him as one of the only practitioners who actually worked for the common welfare. They like to promote him as an example of their socialist philosophy. His main teachings and practice consisted of taking refuge and reciting the six-syllable mantra of Avalokitesvara. He also added one more to the three objects of refuge—the Lama—so that it now reads: I take refuge in the Lama, the Buddha, the Dharma and Sangha. This style of taking refuge grew very popular, with the result that all of the lay people in Tibet now say, "I take refuge in the Lama and the Three Jewels."

According to the Vajrayana, these Three Roots, Three Jewels and Three Objects of Refuge are all present in the form of Guru Padmasambhava. The body of Guru Padmasambhava represents the Sangha. His speech represents the Dharma. The realization state of Guru Padmasambhava represents the Buddha. In this way Guru Rinpoche is the embodiment of the Three Jewels as well as the Three Roots. Guru

Padmasambhava is our root teacher, like the lama. The realization state of Guru Padmasambhava, his love, compassion, kindness and wisdom, all represent the deity or yidam. His beneficial activities for all sentient beings of the ten directions and three times are known as dakinis, while those aspects which continue to protect and remove obstacles, are known as dharmapalas. In a very simple and convenient way, Guru Rinpoche alone is enough to take as our object of refuge.

☞ THE REFUGE TREE

In the space before you, visualize that there is a very beautiful lake, called Danakosha. The water is clean, cool and soothing. It is surrounded by beautiful meadows, trees, hills and mountains. Right in the center of Danakosha Lake is the Wish-Fulfilling Tree. It appears like a large lotus with five branches, one in each of the directions, including the center. It has many different flowers, leaves and numerous small branches and twigs. Each flower and leaf has a beautiful fragrance that pervades in all directions, bringing peace and happiness to sentient beings. The flowers also radiate light.



Guru Padmasambhava is seated on the central lotus upon sun and moon disks in the royal relaxation posture as you see in thangkas, embracing his consort, the Wisdom Dakini, Yeshe Tshogyal. This form is sometimes known as Guru Padmasambhava Vajradhara. Both figures are radiating the light of the five wisdom colors. Their presence is full of love, skillful means and compassion for all living beings. They are looking right at you and smiling. Guru Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tshogyal are not solid form bodies, but wisdom-light bodies, like rainbows.

On the branch in front of Guru Padmasambhava is Buddha Shakyamuni. On the right side of Buddha Shakyamuni is the past Buddha, Dipankara. On his left side is the future Buddha, Maitreya. All three Buddhas are seated on lotuses surmounted by moon disks, radiating wisdom lights and regarding you compassionately with a half-smile.

On the branch to the right of Guru Padmasambhava are all the Bodhisattvas like Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, Vajrapani and Akashagarbha. All these great Bodhisattvas are compassionately smiling at you, wearing different colored silk Sambhogakaya robes, long hair, and jeweled crowns. They are a display of wisdom.

On the branch to the left of Guru Padmasambhava, visualize all the great arhats like Ananda, Kashyapa, Sariputra, Maudgalyayana, Mahakashyapa and Subhuti. They all have monks robes and regard you with a half-smile. On the branch behind Guru Padmasambhava, are all the Dharma teachings of the nine yantras. Each text is magically self-reciting and luminous. The different self-sounding voices of the vowels and consonants radiate wisdom light. This represents the Prajnaparamita teachings which are also known as the Mother of All the Buddhas.

In the sky above Guru Padmasambhava, visualize the whole Dzogchen lineage of the Nyingma School. There are many, many great masters, like the twenty-five students of Guru Padmasambhava and the eight Vidyadharas. From the root teachers all the way up to Samantabhadra, all are sitting in a rainbow in the sky, radiating wisdom-light and lineage blessings while smiling at the practitioner.

Between the branches, in the forks, all the other wrathful and peaceful deities, Buddhas and Mahaherukas surround Guru Padmasambhava, and below them are all the different dharmapalas. The herukas are beings like Vajrakilaya, Hayagriva, Yangdak and Shincho Heruka. The peaceful deities are the Dhyani Buddhas such as Amitabha and Vairocana. The most powerful and special dharmapala of the Dzogchen teachings is Mama Ekagrati. She is standing in front of the lineage in the lake, surrounded by many other dharmapalas, like Rahula, Dorjeloka and Mahakala, all radiating wisdom light and ready to remove the obstacles and obscurations of practitioners. They are on duty twenty-four hours a day like the Fire Department, ready for action as soon as you dial the hotline. All these objects of refuge are aspects of the lineage teacher, Guru Padmasambhava.

The refuge tree comes right out of the center of the lake. There are also many beautiful birds and swans singing Dharma songs and dancing, making every kind of gesture and movement expressing love, peace and bliss. They are also performing the mudras of all the different teachings of the Buddhadharma. There are beautiful animals in the meadowlands and valleys and many different trees and flowers. In the sky there are rainbows, celestial voids, beautiful clouds and small fogs rising. That is the visualization. It is said that the moment you think of it, it should bring peace and happiness to your mind.

We should take refuge in front of this tree with deep respect, devotional longing, happy thoughts and the Three Homages honoring the body, speech and mind. The gesture of respect pertaining to the body is prostration. The gesture of respect in honor of speech is the chanting of words such as these refuge lines. The attitude of respect honoring the mind consists of devotion, confidence and happiness. While prostrating, it is also good to visualize that every single sentient being is doing prostrations with you. In the teaching, it is said, at your right side is your father and on your left side is your mother. You are surrounded by your friends. Even your enemies are doing prostrations and taking refuge. With this thought in mind, we should chant these lines.

Taking refuge is a very important practice for all Buddhists, whether Hinayana, Mahayana or Vajrayana. Every Buddhist practitioner should take refuge.

All Three Jewels are embodied in the person of the lama. The lama is no other than the Three Jewels. With joy, a warm feeling of closeness and deep confidence, take refuge in the Lama, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Visualize all the buddhas, bodhisattva and lineage masters, the entire collection of Dharma texts, the Noble Sangha, and the supreme emanation of all the Buddhas of the three times, in the space directly before you. Guru Padmasambhava appears surrounded by wrathful and peaceful Buddhas in union as well as male and female bodhisattvas. Each one is distinguished by a specific form, color, mudra, and expression, yet each represents true love, the fullness of compassion and non-dual wisdom, radiating a host of beams in all directions. The entire assembly is welcoming you into the family of enlightened beings. You experience a warm, loving feeling, with the faith of confidence in the refuge objects from the bottom of your heart, so that you are moved to say, "From now until attaining the heart of enlightenment, I take refuge in the Lama and the Three Jewels." The commentary reads; *Thus, with prostrations, recite as much as one can. Recite the refuge mantra at the same time that you do prostrations.*

Prostrations serve as an antidote to pride and arrogance while instilling respect, gentleness and appreciation. Begin standing with your hands held together at the heart center. This gesture is called *phyagya*, in Tibetan, which translates as mudra in Sanskrit. This particular mudra is called the "lotus blossom mudra." It is neither fully open nor completely closed; it's like a bud just before it blooms. Hold this to your heart center.

Mudras are symbols and this one indicates that we're opening our heart, which is full of love, compassion, devotion, and confidence. By placing this opening bud at the center of your chest, you symbolize the opening heart. Now, move this mudra up to your crown chakra, and chant, "Namo Buddhaya," Then bring it down to your speech center, saying "Namo Dharmaya." Return the mudra to the heart center once again, chanting "Namo Sanghaya." Then bow down.

There's two kinds of prostrations: short ones and long ones. The short prostration requires you to touch five points to the ground: the forehead, two palms, and two knees. Do this three times. Besides chanting the refuge formula, you can also do the bodhicitta mantra at the end of each prostration.

To do long prostrations, begin by touching the five points to the ground, and then stretch out to your full length with your arms and legs extended fully upon the ground. In either case, begin and end each prostration by standing with your feet close, holding the lotus blossom mudra at your heart center.

☞B. The Generation of Bodhicitta

DA NE ZUNG TE KHOR WA MA TONG BAR
MA GYUR SEM CHAN KUN GYI PHAN DE DRUB

**From now until samsara becomes empty,
I shall accomplish the benefits and happiness of all sentient parent
beings.**

The third section of the ngöndro practice is the generation of bodhicitta. Although each part of the ngöndro has great significance, the bodhicitta aspiration is particularly important. It allows us to see that every sentient being is special. In the view of true bodhicitta, there is no partiality or prejudice. No one is worthless, nobody is higher or lower, everyone is valuable and beautiful. You don't attach to transient manifestations which may appear ugly, bad or unimportant.

Without bodhicitta there is no buddha, no bodhisattvas, and no enlightenment. There is only confusion. All that remains are ego games in a realm of selfish involvement. If you don't have bodhicitta you are not actually taking refuge even if you go through the motions. There is no reality to this type of practice. To sincerely take refuge in the Three Jewels and feel close to the truth they embody, you must have bodhicitta. Without it, your efforts are forced, uptight and meaningless. With it, we acquire skillful means; we become kind and gentle and our practice becomes more powerful, beneficial and beautiful.

When the Buddha Shakyamuni was alive, there was a famous king known as Prasenajit who ruled much of northern India from his capital in Sravasti. He was very devoted to the Buddha but didn't have a lot of time to put into the practice because of all of his worldly duties. His heart was with the Buddha, but being preoccupied with external affairs, he couldn't connect too deeply with the Dharma. This made him worry. So one day he asked the Buddha what to do about it. The Buddha said, "If you can observe just one practice, you will be applying yourself all of the time."

"Oh, and what is that?" asked the King.

"The bodhicitta," said the Buddha. "You must bring bodhicitta into each of your daily activities, whether you are standing, walking, sitting, or sleeping. While you're governing the kingdom or wherever you are, if you keep bodhicitta in your heart, it will transform all of your actions into the practice of the Dharma."

What is the meaning of bodhicitta? It is commonly translated as the mind or thought of enlightenment but more specifically, it stands for the union of love, compassion and wisdom. Love means that you have a warm feeling of kindness toward every single sentient being. Compassion means that when you see any of these loved ones having difficulties, you immediately do whatever you can to help comfort or release them. This is compassion. Wisdom is quite different, but must always be combined with love and compassion. Love and compassion are wonderful and good, but without wisdom, you can't come up with what sentient beings really need.

Wisdom involves learning to apply love and compassion with skill, courage and commitment, free of ego-clinging. Ego-clinging tends to turn love and compassion into negative emotions which are inherently frustrating. Eventually, you can no longer stand it and you're knocked to the ground by attempting to practice love and compassion without wisdom. So wisdom is indispensable. Another name for it is emptiness. Love and compassion equalize in emptiness and from there you can conduct more powerful forms of love and compassion. Continually adjust your efforts in relation to the beings who are to be served, and transform any tendency to cling to phenomena. These are basic wisdom activities inseparable from the love and compassion of bodhicitta.

All beings are special and we all share common goals. This is the basis on which to begin the practice of bodhicitta. We are all very much the same. I want happiness, joy

and peace and do not appreciate being hurt by anyone. In the same way, all other sentient beings prefer happiness, joy and peace. We share the same fundamental desires and have a common ground. There's no difference between any of us at these levels, so in evaluating the real situation, we must learn to acknowledge the equality of ourselves and all others. This is a vital consideration. Sometimes it is difficult to have this attitude, as emotions and old habit patterns do not support us in this effort and conjure more ego-tricks in our mind. To seriously begin, we must be aware of these obstacles and continue to practice, mindful of the equality of all beings.

Exchanging practice is another bodhicitta application, also known as *tong-len*. In this exercise we give our peace and joy to others and remove their pain and suffering. As your mental capabilities grow and you're a little more unified in yourself and established in the reality of the bodhicitta, you will have many opportunities to exchange your happiness for the sufferings of others.

When you grow strong in applying the exchanging practices, the third stage of cultivating bodhicitta is considering that others are more dear than your own self. Every sentient being develops according to their own karma, but given the opportunity, the mental attitude of bodhicitta can become so strong that you learn to feel that others are more important than yourself. This completely reverses our present habit of ego-clinging.

These are the three primary aspects of bodhicitta practice. In the beginning we need to expand our capacity for love, compassion and wisdom. Fully opening to this opportunity is very important. To bring the beauty of love, compassion and wisdom to others, we have to open our heart right away. If we don't do this now, we will be shut down today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, on through the years. Open the door to love, compassion and wisdom now, immediately, according to your capacities.

Opening this door to all beings will not decrease your inner peace and happiness, rather it will expand the joy and sense of well-being in your life. Caring enough to love well, will initiate a completely new vision of the world. Presently, we're only looking at it from one side of the coin; that's how it is here in samsara. When we develop bodhicitta in our mind, we begin to see the whole panorama. The entire universe arises with a sense of great openness, joy, and peace. We learn to relax. The bodhicitta attitude creates such a beautiful atmosphere that everyone becomes your friend and you feel at home wherever you are; you're never a stranger. Beauty follows wherever you go.

Bodhicitta brings a new understanding of the world. This is the perfect place for you to learn. The text says, "From now until samsara becomes empty, I shall accomplish the benefit and happiness of all sentient beings." You have finally found a permanent career; you don't have to worry about losing this job! It's going to last forever, so you may as well do it with joy, inspiration, vision and a peaceful heart. In Sanskrit, practitioners of the bodhicitta are called bodhisattvas. *Sattva* means one who is courageous in relation to the pursuit of enlightenment. Courage is primary. To carry the bodhicitta, we must know its value and importance, but to continue to develop it we must have both courage and commitment. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the moment you begin to practice the Dharma, everything will become simple, and be easily taken care of. Life does not instantly become a pure land or an eternal *grooving on a Sunday afternoon!*

To practice the Dharma does not mean running away from samsara. Since we are already engaged in this world, we should observe everything closely. Until we begin to

practice, we're always trying to hide, trying to run away. This is futile because we always end up unhappy. By practicing the Dharma we can begin to be free in this world. We can engage it creatively. Look closely, discover the meaning, the inner pattern so that you don't have to run and hide all of the time.

This doesn't mean we should settle for simply enduring samsara and being abused. Therefore Buddha encouraged us to be brave and committed to our own enlightenment. When we do this, everything is transformed and purified. We learn to move with the situation, full of joy, vision and confidence, whether here or in the bardo. With this understanding, we are able to enjoy and appreciate our position. The future Buddha Maitreya teaches that this realization lets us move from life to life as if we were strolling from one garden to another, from park to park.



First we considered the four attitudes that reverse the mind, the four thoughts of renunciation which bring a clear understanding of samsara. Then we talked about taking refuge. Together, these summarize the first teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni. These are known as the foundation or ground teachings and are primarily associated with the Hinayana vehicle although they lead all the way to the Vajrayana. In this third section, we have focused on the bodhicitta, the essential teaching of the Mahayana. These three practices serve as the basis for the Vajrayana teachings. The practice is structured in this order to develop our understanding step by step, in a natural way.

☸THIRD: The Accumulation of Merit—Mandala Offering

Now we're going to examine a section of the ngöndro called mandala practice. The first two sections represent Hinayana and Mahayana levels of instruction. Mandala practice corresponds to Vajrayana teachings. Mandala is a Sanskrit term which has several meanings and can be understood on various levels. Mandala has two roots: *man* means mind and *dala* refers to a circle, as well as to maintain. The term indicates a primary pattern reflected through various techniques which help us maintain our minds in a dynamic balance. This is popularly expressed through diagrams symbolizing the state of full realization which are used as supports for meditation and visualization.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, there are many different types of mandalas. They may be visualized, painted on a thangka, a temple wall, or drawn on paper. Sand mandalas are created for various purposes, and there are even some three-dimensional ones. Regardless of the specific style, they all represent the mandala of awakening to the one true nature. By looking at the relationships that comprise the mandala, by meditating and concentrating on the meanings it embodies, one is enriched and illumined by the light of primordial wisdom. What is expressed externally through these symbols is to be understood inwardly. Each line and color used in a mandala relates to a different aspect of mind and awareness. That's why there's such a rich display of form and energy in thangka art; it is an emblem of primordial awareness. This is a general explanation of the mandala principle.

The mandala we use in the ngöndro practice is called an offering mandala although it is also referred to as the wisdom mandala. By making mandala offerings we begin accumulating merit and wisdom. Merit energy is necessary to actualize our Buddha nature. To understand why this is so, consider how everything develops according to the quality of our activities. Our karma echoes back to us through our experiences. This is consistently true. It never varies, or gets things mixed up. All change proceeds on the basis of specific causes and conditions. The first movement gives rise to the second, effects follow causes and in turn become causes for similar effects in the future. Events manifest continuously, one after another.

There are many other ways to understand mandala. The entire physical cosmos is part of a basic, naturally existing mandala. This cosmic mandala contains all phenomena. The luminosity aspect of the true nature gives rise to all observable qualities as well as the wisdoms; everything is complete within this great circle, nothing is missing. This natural configuration is the site of the manifestation and transformation of all things, continually displaying new patterns. The ceaseless activity of the cosmic mandala pervades the universe. In the Vajrayana, this is known as the basic, spontaneously inherent mandala.

A second form of this mandala is known as the wisdom mandala, and this refers to the primordial nature of mind. The true nature is already perfect, the two accumulations of merit and wisdom are primordially complete; there's nothing to be added or taken away, there's nothing we have to establish or purify. Love, compassion, wisdom, understanding, knowledge, all these beautiful qualities are fully present. Everything we say, feel, and think appears within the perfect wisdom mandala of true awareness. Even external phenomena arise within the radiance of this mandala. It is the source mandala for all vision, insight, compassion and beneficial activities. It is called complete because there is nothing missing. It remains exactly as it is all the time, regardless of the transitions and changes in the external or internal environments. By knowing this mandala clearly, you can understand the subtle working of phenomenal

relationships and discover the true nature of all things. This level of vision is developed through regular meditation and practice. Like ascending a staircase or a ladder, you will progressively gain insight into all forms and aspects of the world through the mandala principle. This is known as the wisdom mandala or the mandala of the path.

By understanding the complete wisdom mandala, you connect with the primordial nature. This is the third level of mandala and is known as the awakened mandala. You see the entire universe as a display of the three vajra states: vajra body, vajra speech and vajra mind. Whatever you see is the indestructible display of the wisdom body and whatever you hear, whether words or other sounds, are all forms of the indestructible speech of the Buddhas. All manifestations of space and awareness reveal the deathless nature of the mind of all the Buddhas. When you perceive things in their wholeness and totality, that is a vision of the awakened mandala. By contemplating the true nature through the mandala we can understand all aspects of realization. Our meditation becomes free of dualistic notions such as meditation and meditator and we are enlightened to the singularity at the root of appearances through the mandala of awakening.

Buddhahood is the embodiment of love, compassion and wisdom. We have to realize that this is our true nature. In order to awaken such an understanding in our lives we require competent assistance and auspicious conditions. When the right causes and conditions come together there's no need to be in doubt about actualizing the fruit. You will definitely achieve the right result if your practice is empowered with the appropriate causes and conditions. You will reap exactly what you have planted. If you consider it, you already have the perfect cause, which is your Buddha nature. Now we have to manifest supportive conditions through the accumulation of merit. Buddha refers to these positive activities as the six paramitas. Skillfully applying the paramitas, we can merge all our activities with the primordial nature of mind. This is the way to cultivate our buddha-seed, so that our Buddha nature flourishes and blossoms into Buddhahood.

Among the six paramitas, the first is called generosity, or in Sanskrit *dana paramita*, which translates as "the practice of transcendental generosity." Generosity means giving and sharing. Why do we need to give and share? To counter the habit of ego-clinging, which is always grasping, always holding on or holding back. Through the practice of generosity we're loosening that tendency, releasing that tightness and making everything flow more smoothly so that this openness is available to everyone.

When you offer mandala, visualize Guru Padmasambhava as the embodiment of all of the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha, or of all gurus, devas and dakinis. Feel deeply into the presence of Guru Rinpoche, Buddha Shakyamuni, Tara, and all of the enlightened beings who appear before you, and then make the mandala offering. Understand this offering as a gift to all enlightened beings and chant the following lines:

TSHE RAB KUN GYI LU DANG LONG CHOD PAL
TSHOG NYI DZOG CHIR KON CHOG SUM LA BUL

**The bodies, enjoyments, possessions, and glories
Of the succession of all my lifetimes
I offer to the Three Jewels,
In order to complete the two accumulations.**

The mandala is a complete and total offering. Nothing is held back. It is a gift in which you really open your heart and share that fullness with all sentient beings without reservations. You share everything, not only your possessions or earthly things, but the entire universe, including all the galaxies, the sun, moon and stars, and the earth itself. Offer everything internal as well; all sentient beings, especially your own body, speech and mind. And not simply the vehicle of this lifetime, but “the bodies, enjoyments, possessions, and glories of the succession of all my lifetimes.” Think about all this while making the mudra which symbolizes these things and then do the visualization. This is called the simple mandala mudra with five points: a center and four directions symbolizing the whole universe. The abhidharma explains that our world system has four continents situated in the four directions around Mt. Sumeru. This is symbolized by the basic mandala mudra, but when visualizing this you can also imagine the sun in the east and the moon in the west. This is known as the seven-point mandala offering and it is the briefest form. More detailed versions such as the twenty-one point, twenty-three point, the thirty-seven point mandala and others may include whole sadhanas and prayers.

The mandala mudra has a lot of meanings. On the external level, it symbolizes the cosmology which the Buddha presented in the abhidharma. Inwardly it symbolizes the five active organs; eye, ear, nose, tongue and body, as well as the five consciousnesses and their five objects; form, sound, fragrances, flavors and feelings. Further, there’s five elements, five psycho-physical aggregates, five colors, and five poisons. On a deeper level, there are the five wisdoms. In the Vajrayana teachings, all of this is called the vajra body. When we look at the vajra body, it has five points; two legs, two arms and a head. This symbolizes and contains the whole universe, and is realized according to your understanding and the strength of your meditation. So the mandala is an all-inclusive offering. You’re giving to all of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, dakas, dakinis, and arhats, until there is nothing left to be offered. By including it all, the entire universe, you too, are completely transformed. Make this offering again and again.

To practice mandala in the most common way, hold the mudra, chant the verses and then make the offering. This is a form of generosity practice but it also contains the other five paramitas. To continually abide in that transcendental understanding is known as discipline or morality, the second paramita. To be courageous in your commitment so that it is a steady path, requires tolerance or patience. If your practice is full of love and joy, you have aroused the joyful effort paramita. To clearly visualize the objects of refuge, including all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and contemplate the profound meaning behind the mudra without losing your focus, is the practice of transcendent concentration. Keep your mind on the target. To understand all of this as a display of the true nature, an ongoing manifestation of the wisdoms, without holding or grasping, is the practice of transcendental wisdom. Mandala practice enables us to perform all six paramitas at once. This is an example of the skillful means available through the Vajrayana teachings. There is no need to separate the paramitas, or think, “Today I’ll practice generosity, tomorrow discipline, and next year I’ll practice patience.” We can merge them all together into one practice which is whole and continuous in or out of meditation.

The more complex mandala offerings involve the use of a ritual mandala plate which may be made of various materials. Metals such as bronze, copper, brass or silver are popular. If you can afford solid gold, or one ornamented with diamonds, rubies and emeralds, that is better yet. Use the best one you can afford. If you are a poor wandering yogi and haven’t been able to acquire anything fancy, you can use stones,

ceramic tiles or even smooth pieces of wood. Make the offering material of whatever your situation allows, but in these modern times, many of you have access to beautiful glass tears, polished or semi-precious stones, jewels and metals, cardamom seeds, or grains like washed rice, which may be gently sprinkled with saffron-colored water, and other nice things. The mandala plate symbolizes the ground of the universe, as well as the *alaya*, the eighth consciousness or “subconscious storehouse” where all of our habit patterns are kept intact. We’ve dumped a lot of junk in that closet and it needs to be cleaned up. Well, through the mandala practice, the clean-up will begin.

Having prepared saffron-colored water, dip the tip of the ring finger of your right hand into it and transfer this drop to the center of the mandala plate which is held in the left hand. Rub the mandala plate with the inside of your bare right wrist, three times in a clockwise direction. This symbolizes the cleaning up of your subconscious which actually comes about through the power of the accumulation of merit and the practice of the six paramitas. After this, use your right hand to take the offerings which have already been washed and prepared and arrange them on the plate in the form of the seven-point mandala as you begin chanting the verses. When the arrangement is complete, offer it up to the objects of refuge with both hands. Having chanted the verse, lower the plate and tilt its contents back into the cloth on your lap. Repeat this again and again. That’s the basic form of mandala practice.

If you have time and want to do something more elaborate, you can create various mandalas which involve visualizing the body, speech and mind, the five aggregates, and everything else in the universe. With all this in mind, make the mandala offering. Mandala is an extremely simple but special Vajrayana technique for the accumulation of merit, which is a very necessary and important aspect of the path.



The first time that Gampopa came to meet Milarepa, he was told to wait for about two weeks. Milarepa didn’t usually do this kind of thing to his students. As an old man, he was often hanging out in his cave and would casually meet whoever came to see him. But this time, he postponed the meeting for awhile. The day finally came and they met in the open air outside the cave. Milarepa sat upon a big boulder. Gampopa made prostrations and approached respectfully, offering gold and tea leaves. Milarepa put them aside and asked, “What is your name?”

Gampopa said “Sodnam Rinchen.” *Sodnam* translates as merit and *rinchen* means very precious.

When Milarepa heard this he mumbled the name a number of times, and finally said, “You have a very good name. Merit dispels obstacles and transforms ignorance so that you can actualize enlightenment and become *precious* to everyone. Merit is one of the two accumulations, the other being wisdom. When the accumulations of merit and wisdom are complete, you will become *precious* to all sentient beings.” He paused and looked at the things Gampopa had placed before him. “I see that you offer me gold and tea leaves, but for an old man like myself, gold is not really a good friend, and I know that we aren’t going to get along. Leave here with it while you can, before we get upset at each other; please take it back. And tea is really good, I like tea, but I don’t have a pot to make it in, so I really can’t use that either; please take the tea too, thank you.” For Gampopa, all of this was an indication that in order to achieve enlightenment he would need to accumulate a lot of merit!

That was Milarepa’s first message to Gampopa, but it applies to everyone. Those who want to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all beings must strive to accumulate merit. In the effort to dispel obscurations and reveal our Buddha nature, merit energy makes a big difference. Merit arising from virtuous actions is the source of supportive conditions necessary to actualize our Buddha nature. We have the cause, but we need the special assistance of merit energy to get enlightened. There’s a famous quotation by Nagarjuna, “Awakening to the dharmakaya is the result of the accumulation of wisdom, awakening to the rupakaya comes from the accumulation of merit.’

Positive activities such as generosity, discipline, compassion, tolerance and concentration, which involve concepts and the exercise of speech, thought or motion, are all considered part of the accumulation of merit. The accumulation of wisdom is beyond all activity; the mind simply relaxes in the primordial sphere, bright within the fullness of the Buddha nature. Activity applies to motion in the mundane world, to the relative changes which appear on the surface. But the surface itself is only an aspect of a deeper level, so it doesn’t make much sense to separate things too much. We need both merit and wisdom and there is no need to isolate these aspects or swing back and forth, alternately accepting one and rejecting the other. We have to embrace the totality and bring all action into the sphere of enlightenment. This is why we need the two accumulation practices.

Mandala offerings accumulate merit through the observance of the first four paramitas; through mental concentration we begin to accumulate wisdom and actualize our Buddha nature. After making offerings, meditate for a moment on Guru Padmasambhava and all the lineage masters. Then simply relax in the natural state without holding to any particular thought or image. Allow every activity to transform into the free play of the true nature. This is the accumulation of wisdom. By merging the two, we are practicing the union of the two accumulations. In truth, merit and wisdom are never separate from each other, so to practice in this way reflects the nature of their non-dual union.

Accumulation practices are really necessary. The true nature is like a mirror which reflects relative, conditional appearances. The phenomenal level is a reflection of the true nature. That’s why Buddha taught that form is emptiness, and emptiness is form; they are never really separate from each other. We want to know the true nature *as it is in its entirety* not just a little corner of it. Without depreciating or exaggerating, we must discover it *as it is*. Therefore it is important to combine the accumulation of

merit and wisdom through meditation on the true nature. Conjoined with wisdom, the merit accumulated by acts of generosity, love, compassion and bodhicitta, resonates with the primordial nature until it almost begins to shine. A very famous Dzogchen quotation says, “Awareness of the primordial state comes about through the practice of the accumulations.” Even the highest Dzogchen teachings pointing beyond activity and effort, require some energy in order to accelerate the full, clear and perfect realization of self-originated awareness.

☸FOURTH: The Purification of Obscurations-The Meditation of Vajrasattva

Vajrasattva is called the all pervasive sovereign of both the outer and inner tantras. He is also known as the Lord of the Body, Speech, Mind, Qualities and Activities of all the Buddhas. Vajrasattva is the supreme embodiment of the whole tantric mandala and lord of all the buddha families. The buddha families display the aspects of primordial wisdom which pervade the world in every direction. The major radiations are known as the five wisdoms, which are symbolized by the five buddha families.



Vajrasattva is a Sanskrit name. *Vajra* means “diamond” and symbolizes the innermost essence of love, compassion and wisdom which is indestructible. *Sattva* is one who is heroic or courageous. The union of wisdom and compassion describes the nature of Vajrasattva and all the buddhas. All of the extraordinary powers and qualities of our Buddha nature derive from this indestructible, vajra-like essence. Those who discover this vajra nature, are enlightened. To practice on Vajrasattva is a reflection on

the external level signifying that we are striving to awaken. On the inner level we are developing unyielding courage, so that in trying to bring a clear understanding of all this to sentient beings, we actually begin to radiate and communicate the transcendental beauty of these qualities.

Having discovered the indestructible courage of bodhicitta, the perfect union of love, compassion and wisdom, or the non-duality of skillful methods of activity and emptiness-awareness, we can begin to apply ourselves. If this was not our true nature, it would be futile to practice. We would just be wasting our time. Without this vajra essence, all efforts would be completely useless. No matter how much you try to make charcoal white, it will remain black. The indestructible attributes of our true being are hidden behind all these habit patterns. To go beyond them, we must evoke vajra courage and a firm commitment. This is why we need to practice on Vajrasattva as Guru Padmasambhava instructed.

The visualization of Vajrasattva is a support for the realization of our Buddha nature. Why do we need support? Because we are so habituated to our conceptions that we continually relate to the world as if there were an inherently existent dualism of subject and object. We need to work with the mental attitude which characterizes our present experience. When we move beyond duality and merge with Vajrasattva in the true nature as it is, there will no longer be any need for external supports to invoke the intrinsic reality of indestructible courage.

There are two ways we employ this practice. Both are designed to help us discover our hidden Vajrasattva nature. The first is to visualize Buddha Vajrasattva above the crown of your head. This is practicing according to the system of the outer tantras. According to the inner tantras, visualize yourself as having completely merged and become one with Vajrasattva.

These two forms are called visualizing the deity in front of you or *mdun-gyi*, and self-emanated or *dag-kyi*, which is to see yourself in the form of the deity. The ngöndro practice makes use of both forms. First, visualize Buddha Vajrasattva one arm's length above your head, seated on a white lotus with one thousand petals. To be specific, the center of the lotus connects to the central channel via a luminous stalk which runs through the top of the head. Your crown chakra is wide open and surrounded by a halo of light. A white moon disc covers the pollen bed of the lotus, upon which Vajrasattva sits in the vajra posture. Vajrasattva is luminous and semi-transparent. His body is not solid but made of wisdom, loving-kindness and compassion. He has one face, two arms, two legs, and is a rich white color, shining like a mountain glacier reflecting the light of a thousand full moons. The very embodiment of compassion and wisdom, he is actually no other than Guru Padmasambhava and the heart of all lineage masters, appearing in this sambhogakaya form. Visualize Vajrasattva in union with his wisdom consort, who is known as Dorje Nyema in Tibetan or Vajra Garvi in Sanskrit. In his right hand, he holds a vajra vertically at the level of his heart center. His left hand is leaning on his hip and holding an upside-down bell. Dorje Nyema is the same color as Vajrasattva and she also has one face, two arms, and two legs. Both of them wear sambhogakaya ornamentation. Her right hand holds a curved knife and in her left is a skullcup filled with wisdom nectar. Her left arm embraces Vajrasattva around his neck. Both are in the primordial state of great blissfulness, radiating the light of wisdom, compassion, love, and peace to beings in all directions. This bliss helps magnetize our power of concentration and deepens our feelings of devotion to the teacher, the teachings, and all sentient beings.

Begin by chanting these lines:

CHI WOR LAMA DOR SEM YER MED PE
KU LE DUD TSII GYUN BAB DRIB JANG GYUR

**Above the crown of my head is Vajrasattva,
Inseparable from the lama.
From Vajrasattva's body a nectar stream descends,
Purifying my obscurations.**

Recite this once and then begin to chant the Hundred Syllable mantra of Vajrasattva. Vajrasattva's mantra is one of the longer ones. If you're just beginning you might say it once, seven, or twenty-one times. If you have time, do a mala, which is 108 mantras. Do even more if you can.

While reciting the mantra, hold this visualization. In the heart center of Buddha Vajrasattva, visualize a five-pointed crystal dorje which stands upon a small moon disc. In the center sphere of the dorje there is a small HUM syllable, white in color, bright with wisdom light. Again, the moon, the dorje and the HUM are not solid objects. The upright vajra is surrounded by the letters of the one-hundred-syllable mantra. Each syllable stands independently and is self-resounding as the garland rotates around the edge of the moon disc. It's good to visualize this, but if it proves too difficult, don't worry about it. Everything that is explained in the sadhana is there from the beginning, so with that understanding, you can just go ahead and recite the mantra.

During this practice, do not be too concerned about details such as the precise size of the vajra or the exact number of petals in the lotus. Don't get too intellectual. Put the analytical scholar business aside, and concentrate with devotion on the warm and loving presence of Vajrasattva and his consort. Practice feeling their blissful immanence. That will take care of everything.

While chanting and visualizing the self-reciting syllables circling clockwise around the moon-disc, the mantra echoes from the hearts of both Vajrasattva and his consort Dorje Nyema. This initiates a blazing forth of love and wisdom energy which arises spontaneously out of their completeness, as white light radiates from their bodies and descends through the halo around your crown chakra into the central channel. This starry nectar is not contained inside the central channel; your whole body becomes soaked in Vajrasattva's wisdom light. This light completely purifies all of our obscurations, obstacles, disease, and sicknesses. That's why Vajrasattva is known as the purification buddha. This is very special. Meditate on the form of Vajrasattva and repeat the mantra as more and more of the luminous nectar descends, filling your chakras and totally purifying all emotional and mental obscurations until eventually your whole body is saturated with the pure energy of wisdom, love and compassion. This is the light of Buddha Vajrasattva. Through the practice, you become similar to him. With this understanding, continue to recite the mantra as much as you can.

Recite it as much as you can and finally, imagine that both Vajrasattva and his consort smile your way and say joyfully, "O noble son or daughter, now you've completely purified your obscurations." Then they both dissolve into a small circle of white light, which enters through your crown chakra and descends through the central channel until it reaches the heart center. At that moment, you are transformed into the Buddha Vajrasattva.

To assume the form of Vajrasattva, you must have an understanding of the mandala of awakening, which means seeing this entire universe as the display of the mandala of Buddha Vajrasattva. All form is recognized as the body emanation of indestructible Vajrasattva. All vibrations, from the sound of the ocean to ambulance sirens, are the song of the indestructible hero communicating his message of true bodhicitta. The open, unobstructed nature of mind and space reveal the adamant courage of the bodhisattvas. If we have a clear understanding of these three aspects of reality, we can meditate with confidence for a few minutes and then recite one mala of the short mantra which consists of six syllables:

OM VAJRA SATTVA HUNG

If you cannot do all of this as elaborately as I have described, just try to relax without thinking and analyzing. Remember that everything is primordially pure and that it is all arising in the mandala of awakening. Be confident in that understanding as you concentrate on the practice. To analyze or indulge in intellectual activities during a session is a form of doubt and hesitation. Reverberating with negative qualities won't leave you any energy for meditation. Just apply yourself courageously, with full confidence and devotion. This is the way to connect directly with the healing, cleansing power of indestructible reality.

Recite the six-syllable mantra for as long as you have time, then chant:

OD ZHU DAG NANG DANG DRE RO CHIG GYUR

**Vajrasattva melts into light
And becomes mingled in one taste
With one's own perceptions.**

Finally then, Vajrasattva is dissolved. This means we're returning to the basic ground of mind and recognizing that everything is a reflection of the primordial source. The phrase, "pure from the beginning, free from all extremes and complexities," describes the true nature of mind. Everything arises as a relative transformation of that pure, absolute condition. So when we dissolve the deity, it is like returning back to the original state which is all-pervading. Here there are no longer any divisions into times, directions, outer and inner. There is no partiality in the heart of perfect wisdom. Dissolution in the primordial nature represents a more serious step forward on the profound path of indestructible heroism. It is free of all dualisms such as birth and death or existence and non-existence. All limitations are transcended in the innate condition as we practice merging back into that nature, relaxing into it. This is known as practicing on the absolute Vajrasattva. Relax your mind and meditate this openness for as long as you have time. If thoughts come up, don't pursue them; just let them go without suppressing or grasping them. That is known as the great Dzogchen meditation.

FIFTH: The Swiftly Penetrating Blessings of the Guru Yoga

The fifth section of the ngöndro is called the *lamai naljor* [*blamai 'byor*] in Tibetan or Guru Yoga in Sanskrit. Guru and lama express the same meaning in these two languages. Two roots comprise this term: one means full, heavy or rich. The other means "higher one" or "extraordinary one," which refers to a teacher who embodies the highest realization of love, compassion, and wisdom through awareness of the true nature. One who is wealthy in love and compassion, and heavy with wisdom. In other

words, having awakened to the fullness and power of the bodhicitta realization, he or she has become extraordinary.

According to the Buddha, the teacher must possess two qualities: first, this individual must have a good understanding of the entire Dharma, from the sutra, vinaya and abhidharma levels, up through the tantrayana, plus a working knowledge of all phenomena on the relative levels. The second quality refers to an understanding of the true nature, and at least some degree of realization of bodhicitta. This is the central message expressed throughout the Buddhadharmas. Whether it is stated directly or indirectly, the final goal is reached by awakening to the ultimate meaning of bodhicitta. That's the bottom line of every teaching, from the Hinayana up through the Vajrayana and Dzogchen. All are designed to awaken us to the absolute bodhicitta, which is also known as the Buddha nature, tathagatagarbha, and buddha-seed. To be a qualified lama or teacher, one must have a fair measure of these two qualities or at best, a complete realization, in which case you would expect a super lama!

The Buddha taught that right relationship with the teacher or lama is really important, for he is the one who connects you to all Buddha's teachings. He opens the door of the Dharma so you can enter the path of enlightenment. The lama is considered particularly important in the Vajrayana tradition. This is expressed through the descriptions of the Three Roots or objects of refuge wherein the guru or lama is known as the "root of blessings." The entire process of realization depends on his or her influence. Without the guru the lineage teachings would not be preserved and transmitted in a fluid, unbroken continuity. If there's no lama, the teaching situation does not arise. This is why it's said that the lama is so important. In the inner tantra, it is stated that the lama is the Buddha, the lama is the Dharma and the lama is the Sangha. He's considered lord of the entire Vajrayana family.

In the process of opening to the truth of the teachings, the lama is invaluable. He puts you into direct contact with the body, speech and mind of the Buddha. Even though there are books, written words alone will not rouse your enlightened nature. Only a master can clarify the true meaning and reveal the transcendent essence of the printed word. A truly qualified teacher has knowledge of many liberating techniques and transmits these with the warmth of the lineage blessings.

The works of the great masters of ancient India and Tibet express the highest regard for the teacher. They're not just trying to glorify individual beings; they are illuminating a principle. On the basis of personal experience and realization, they are openly acknowledging, for our sakes, that the lama is the only true access to the lineage teachings. Since the times of the Buddha Shakyamuni, those individuals who attain to the highest realization have done so through devotion to a true teacher.

Even if you are a great scholar with knowledge of all of the teachings, if you don't practice under the auspices of a qualified lineage master, you won't gain enlightenment. All the schools tell stories of great students who have not yet discovered their Buddha nature because they lack a connection with a qualified guide. Philosophical knowledge alone will not enlighten.

In India, the famous Dzogchen master, Manjushrimitra was originally a teacher at Nalanda University. Academically he was one of the most intellectually developed scholars of his time. But to awaken the pristine awareness of primordial wisdom, he had to link up with a qualified master. He had become blocked at the threshold of awakening and couldn't go on. Manjushri appeared and told him, "If you want to gain

enlightenment in this lifetime, go see the young Dzogchen master Garab Dorje.” Manjushrimitra received Garab Dorje’s teachings and thereby became enlightened.

Manjushrimitra’s foremost student was Shri Singha, another highly developed scholar who had to meet a qualified master in order to attain full realization. Shri Singha was told by Avalokitesvara, “If you want to be enlightened within this lifetime, you must contact the master Manjushrimitra.” So he went and met Manjushrimitra and received the final instructions which instantly sparked his full awakening to the Dzogchen state.

Naropa was a great Indian scholar who served as the northern gatekeeper at the monastic university of Vikramashila. However, to come to final realization he had to meet his guru. Instructed by a wisdom dakini, Naropa left the monastery and after considerable hardship, finally found Tilopa. At first Tilopa ignored him, and even seemed to torture him by putting him through twelve difficult and sixteen smaller ordeals before he was finally given the teachings. Most great practitioners do not connect with their gurus for scholarly knowledge. They may even be more educated or widely renowned than their masters. This was the case with Naropa. It required the blessing of Tilopa, however, to bring him to full realization. This is the value in contacting a truly qualified lineage teacher.

Having the good fortune to encounter and recognize this situation, a student should devote himself to the teacher and the teachings with complete trust and confidence. As their minds merge, the devotee comes to the same realization as the teacher, sparkling with the wisdom of all the lineage masters. This is how the teachings have been transmitted right up to the present. And that’s a brief overview of the importance of the lama.

In practicing guru yoga we focus on Guru Padmasambhava, the true embodiment of all of buddhas and bodhisattvas. There have been buddhas in the past and there will be others in the future, but the Buddha of the present is Guru Padmasambhava. To begin the practice, visualize yourself as Vajrayogini and chant these verses:

RANG NYID DORJE NALJOR DUN KHA RU
TSAWAI LAMA PEME KUR ZHENG GYUR

**Oneself is Vajrayogini and in the sky in front,
the root teacher manifests in the form of Padmasambhava.**

Vajrayogini is a wisdom dakini, a totally enlightened being, a female Buddha. Why do we visualize ourselves as Vajrayogini? According to the Vajrayana, Vajrayogini represents the profound wisdom or clarity of the true nature which is Prajnaparamita, Samantabhadri, the basic ground or reality of all phenomena. Our absolute condition is reflected in her form. She is known as the Mother of all Buddhas. Enlightenment comes about by knowing our true nature and merging with wisdom. This union will transform ignorance and dispel all darkness. Presently, we have thick mental and emotional obscurations which keep this from happening.

The conception and birth of a buddha child requires that there be a mother, so we invoke the primordial power of our absolute nature through the great mother of transcendent wisdom, Buddha Vajrayogini. She is visualized with one face, two arms

and two legs. Her body color is ruby red, she is naked and semi-wrathful with bone ornaments and a third eye in her forehead. Her right hand holds a curved knife and her left holds a skull cup. A three-pointed katvanga, symbolizing the power of the three wisdoms, lies across her left shoulder. She gazes slightly upward at the guru and wears a necklace of fifty-one skulls. Like Vajrasattva and all the other tantric deities, Vajrayogini is not a substantially existent form but appears in a transcendental body of rainbow-wisdom light standing upon a lotus base surmounted by sun and moon discs. She is leaning to her left, as if about to walk. She tramples a demon under each foot. A halo of wisdom fire surrounds her body while the sun and moon shine in the sky above. This is how we should visualize ourselves.



In the space before us we see Guru Padmasambhava as the root teacher, the embodiment of all buddhas, the dharma, the sangha, all gurus, devas and dakinis. He represents all enlightened masters and possesses all the skillful means which lead to perfect realization of our true nature. Having visualized yourself as “wisdom”, Guru Padmasambhava is “skillful means.” You’re going to merge these two in order to awaken your Buddha nature.

Guru Yoga is the most important practice in the Vajrayana path. The Four Reversals we recite at the beginning of ngondro invoke the blessings of Guru Padmasambhava and develop into Guru Yoga. The essence of ngondro is Guru Yoga, although this practice is not limited to the ngondro. Guru Padmasambhava is known as the Buddha of the Degenerate Era. As the degeneration proceeds, if we invoke his blessings and meditate on Guru Padmasambhava, obstacles can be removed very easily and we will have a realization that can benefit other sentient beings. Therefore, it is very important to do this practice. Always

mingle your mind with the mind of Guru Padmasambhava. Invoke your Buddha Nature in absolute union with Guru Rinpoche all the time.

The Nyingma are not the only ones who practice on Padmasambhava. He is the Buddha or Guru for all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, such as the Sakya, Kagyu and Gelugpa. If we read the books, the biographies and lives of the great masters of the different lineages, there is hardly anyone who didn't receive teachings and blessings from Guru Padmasambhava in their visions, dreams or in the state of direct perception. Nearly every one was blessed by him, and thereby came to realization.

In Tibetan Buddhist history, Guru Padmasambhava is the founder of Tibetan Buddhism. He established the first schools of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet and blessed every part of the land. It is said in the teachings that there is not even one square inch of ground that was not blessed by Guru Padmasambhava. With the assistance of Wisdom Dakini Yeshe Tshogyal, he hid termas, lineage teachings and ritual objects throughout Tibet, in rocky mountains, in lakes, rivers, trees, in the sky, and many other places. He gave many prophecies and explained how to use the termas to benefit all sentient beings from generation to generation until now.

Guru Padmasambhava is not only for Tibetans. He worked for all sentient beings. For example, among the eight emanations of Guru Padmasambhava, only two occur in Tibet. The rest happen in different parts of the world. He has always been blessing practitioners throughout all of history. As Guru Padmasambhava himself said, "Those who pray with confidence, concentration and bodhicitta are always heard by me."

There are many important reasons to practice on Guru Rinpoche; for the purpose of overcoming degeneration, for the removal of one's own obscurations, as well as to help sentient beings and to bring peace and harmony to the world. Therefore, practicing Guru Yoga is important.

Guru Padmasambhava is visualized with one face, two arms and two legs, seated in the posture of royal ease upon a sun and moon disk. His right hand holds a five pointed vajra while the left makes the equanimity mudra near his navel center. In the palm of his left hand, he holds a skull cup filled with long-life nectar and a small vase filled with blissful amrita. Wisdom light radiates from these objects. Like Vajrayogini, a trident staff or katvanga leans across his left shoulder. Guru Padmasambhava appears in a wisdom body, brilliant with the energy of love and compassion. Wisdom lights radiate in all directions. Feel a very strong sense of presence and closeness between yourself and Guru Padmasambhava. In that disposition, see the entire universe as the mandala of the guru. Recognize that everything is a display of Guru Padmasambhava.

Now, full of confidence, devotion, closeness, warmth and presence, chant the following prayer three times:

DU SUM SANGYE MA LU DU PAI KU
TSAWAI LAMA CHOG LA SOL WA DEB
DI CHI BARDO SUM DU THUG JE ZUNG
DU SUM GYUN CHED MED PAR CHIN GYI LOB

**The embodiment of all the Buddhas of the three times,
without exception.**

Most excellent root teacher, I pray to you.

In this and future lives, and in the bardo, in these three,

**Hold me with your compassion
Bless me ceaselessly throughout the three times!**

Then chant the mantra of Guru Padmasambhava:

OM AH HUNG VAJRA GURU PEMA SIDDHI HUNG



Do this for as long as you have time, all the while concentrating on Guru Padmasambhava and continuing to visualize yourself as Vajrayogini. At times focus on devotional feelings and opening your heart to the presence of the lama. At other times, generate an appreciative awareness of how precious this relationship is. Shift your concentration to various aspects and feel the resonances of this bond while continuing to recite the prayers.

Then begin reciting the Vajra Guru Mantra as many times as you can. Don't skip or add any syllables to it and chant it to a beautiful tune. Try to recite at least one mala of this mantra per session. When you are done, chant the following lines:

**The blessings and empowerments of body, speech, and mind
Are completely and perfectly obtained.**

While chanting this, visualize three radiant syllables in Guru Padmasambhava's three places; a white OM at his forehead, a red AH in his speech center, and a blue HUM at his heart. If you find these difficult to visualize, simply imagine white, red and blue lights glowing in those three places. Near the end of the mantra recitation, a small circle of white light flies out like a shooting star from Guru Padmasambhava's forehead and enters directly into your own, transferring all the body blessings of Guru Padmasambhava and removing your physical obscurations. This light actualizes the nirmanakaya.

From the red syllable AH at Guru Padmasambhava's throat, a point of red light emanates and enters your speech center, removing all obscurations associated with speech and actualizing the sambhogakaya. A strong blue light emanates from the syllable HUM at the heart of Guru Padmasambhava, penetrating your heart center, transferring the blessings of his wisdom mind. This removes your mental obscurations and actualizes the dharmakaya of Buddhahood. Finally, lights radiate out from Guru Padmasambhava's forehead, throat and heart. Simultaneously, the lights enter your three centers, transferring the complete blessings of his realization, purifying all residual habits. This fourth radiation actualizes full realization of Buddhahood, which is also known as the svabhavikakaya. Finally, the guru dissolves into light. These phases are a condensed version of the four empowerments.

When you receive the blessings of Guru Padmasambhava, do not expect that he will appear in this colorful costume with a trident, holding a skull cup and dorje and wearing a special hat. But if you practice focusing your love and devotion in this way, you will definitely experience clarity, a sky-like awareness and a calm, joyful mind. That is the light of Guru Padmasambhava, the first stage of his blessing. Then you can develop higher and higher and really remove obscurations and obstacles. You may even have experiences in visions, dreams or the waking state. But don't expect that he will appear anything like he does in thangkas. To help sentient beings, Guru Rinpoche works through many different forms and mediums.

As the guru dissolves into lights which are absorbed into your three places, chant these words:

VAJRA GURU KAYA WAKA TSITTA SIDDHI HUM

Kaya means body, *waka* means speech, *tsitta* means mind, and *siddhi* in this case, means completed. This means that all spiritual accomplishments are complete.

LAMA OD ZHU RANG THIM YER MED NGANG
RIG TONG DON GYI LAMAI RANG ZHAL TA

**The teacher dissolves into light, is absorbed into oneself,
And becomes inseparable with one's own state of being.
Behold the emptiness-awareness, the true face of the lama!**

Guru Padmasambhava dissolves into multi-colored points of light about the size

of peas, which shower out of his crown chakra into yours and descend through your central channel, concentrating in your heart center. This symbolizes the union of skillful means and wisdom, which have completely united. You are now in the domain of absolute truth, the unconditional, ultimate reality of the guru. From this viewpoint, there is no difference between Guru Padmasambhava and Vajrayogini or subject and object. Everything is merged into the singularity of true awareness or *rigpa*. To let your mind relax in that state is known as “beholding the emptiness-awareness, the true face of the lama,” which is the union of skillful means and wisdom, the merging of guru, dakini, and deity with one’s own non-conceptual awareness.

The guru embodies skillful means, the dakini is wisdom and the yidam is their union. In one session of guru yoga, you can attain union with all Three Roots. Absorbing the guru into oneself, remain in meditation as long as you have time. This is the highest form of meditation and is no different than what is practiced in the Dzogchen or Mahamudra traditions. Relax into this absolute state without succumbing to mental activities. To maintain ourselves in the pure and simple state of our true nature is the highest form of meditation and practice.

Continue to meditate in this way for as long as you can. At the end of the session, when everything arises, hold the vision and observe phenomena from the primordial state; see all things as they are, including your body and identity, as transient forms of reflected light or as the flow of surface waves and tides on the ocean. Observe without grasping or holding on to any of it, let things arise, and let them go. Don’t block the movement of the true nature. Learn to perform all your activities within this awareness. Even if you have a high realization, always respect and appreciate the patterns of phenomenal existence.

Begin the ngondro practices focusing on Guru Yoga. Start by taking refuge and generating bodhicitta briefly, then go to the Guru Yoga and practice it as I said. If you are somehow very busy and don't have enough time, then just do the Seven Line Prayer three or seven times, recite the mantra of Guru Padmasambhava and receive blessings before meditating. Always practice with concentration and confidence. If we do that, there is no need to doubt that we are going to achieve great results.

This completes a brief look at the practice of guru yoga.

☞SIXTH: The Transference (Phowa)

The sixth section of the ngöndro is the practice of *phowa* or the transference of consciousness after death. Briefly, we have a body, the power of speech, and the mind. In the common view, mind is the occupant and the body is the residence. On the deeper levels of Buddhist philosophy, the body and speech are both considered temporary residents of the mind. In either case, we’re leasing this home for a short time and the landlord is not very helpful. If anything breaks, you have to fix and pay for it yourself! One way or another, sooner or later, the body and the mind are going to have to separate. We are not going to stay like this forever.

Phowa or transference is relevant because of the inevitability of the body-mind separation. Buddha gave many different teachings on this pivotal transition. Before you leave home, you have to consider the manner of your departure. Should you rent a truck or carry the luggage on your back, as is done all over Asia? Will you go by bus or train, fly coach or hire the space shuttle? And where should you go? Phowa practice is designed to lead the mind to the pure land of the Buddha Amitabha. That’s where we

plan on going. In Sanskrit this is known as ‘Sukhavati’ or in Tibetan as ‘Dewachen’ which translates as great bliss. Buddha Shakyamuni said that this is the place where all enlightened beings reside; Green Tara, White Tara, Avalokitesvara, Guru Padmasambhava and all the buddhas and great bodhisattvas. Knowing this should fill you with confidence and joy, as you contemplate going there yourself. Simply think, “When the time comes, my consciousness will go to Buddha Amitabha’s pure land.”



In preparation for the ejection, there are a number of visualizations involving the movement of syllables in the channels and other exercises. Phowa is an entire system of practices designed to establish this connection so that we can easily transfer our consciousness to the pure land of Buddha Amitabha at death. It is with that intention that we approach this practice as part of the ngöndro.

The simplest application of the phowa is to remain as you normally appear while visualizing Buddha Amitabha one arm’s length above your crown chakra. Imagine your consciousness concentrated in your central channel, which is wide open at the crown. This open window is a direct conduit to the heart of Amitabha.

GONPO OD PAG MED LA SOL WA DEB
ZAB LAM PHO WA JONG WAR CHIN GYI LOB

I pray to the protector Amitabha, the Buddha of limitless light.

Grant me the blessings to perfect the Transference of Consciousness, in the profound path of Phowa.

Chant these lines while you hold this intention with strength and sincerity. Imagine your consciousness ascending to the heart center of the Buddha Amitabha and then returning. It is not really necessary to visualize consciousness leaving the body. Simply think, “When the time comes, this is what I will do; I am definitely going to transfer my consciousness to the heart center of Buddha Amitabha.” Practicing in this way opens us to this possibility, and prepares the passage for the transference of consciousness to Dewachen. Although it is not mentioned here, you can conclude the practice by envisioning Buddha Amitabha dissolving into light, which is absorbed into your heart center and merges with your awareness. Meditate for a short time in that union.

🌀SEVENTH: Chöd Practice and Dedication Prayers

The seventh and final section of the ngöndro is a combination of the *chöd* practice and dedication prayers.

There’s three lines:

DA NI LU DANG LONG CHOD GE TSAR CHE
MA GYUR DRO LA PHANG PA MED PAR TANG
DRO DON LAB CHEN GEG MED DRUB PAR SHOG

**Now, my body, possessions, and the source of my virtue, all together,
I give without clinging to all beings who have been my parents.
May I accomplish great benefits, unobstructedly, for all beings.**

What is the meaning of the Chöd? Like Phowa, Chöd is also an elaborate Vajrayana teaching involving a whole system of practices. Chöd means cutting through. What is it you are cutting through? Ego-clinging, self grasping, fear and the holding of dualistic thoughts. To begin this practice, we focus on dualistic thoughts and ego-clinging. This attitude of self-grasping is the root of all our illusory fabrications. It is the source of all of our difficulties. So we cut it immediately, giving ego-clinging a blow to the head.

How do we make this cut? In the disposition of profound equanimity, knowing that our true nature is as vast as the sky. We must have a basic realization of great openness. The unshakeable equanimity of the true nature is beyond hope and intimidation, so be fearless and confident in your approach.

In a sadhana called the “Bellowing Laugh of the Dakinis” by the famous Nyingma master Jigme Lingpa, he wrote-

“I am a fearless yogi who practices crazy wisdom activity. Through realization which encompasses samsara and nirvana as equal, I dance and trample upon the demons of ego-clinging and grind samsaric, dualistic thinking into dust.”

With such thoughts, we make a gift of ourselves and share everything that we have, including the body, with all beings without any exceptions or partiality. That’s the way to cut off ego-clinging and the basic idea behind Chöd practice.

The third and last line is a dedication of merit to all beings combined with an aspirational prayer. In English it says: “May I accomplish great benefits, unobstructedly, for all beings.” This aspirational-dedication prayer concludes the whole ngöndro practice, not just the Chöd section. You’re sharing whatever merit you have accumulated from performing the ngöndro for the joy, peace and complete enlightenment of all beings. You are also expressing an aspirational wish to be a continual source of benefit to all sentient beings until they all reach enlightenment. As Longchenpa says in another prayer, “May I not become bored and tired of accomplishing the benefit of others. By my own tremendous, impartial service to others, may everyone attain Buddhahood together.”

Now I have completely opened the ngöndro practice to you and explained many different aspects of it so that you can begin to engage it with a good understanding of what you are doing. There is one last important point you should know. Each of the major sections is to be practiced one hundred thousand times. The refuge practice, prostrations, generating the bodhicitta, the mandala offering, Vajrasattva’s one-hundred-syllable mantra, and the mantra of Guru Padmasambhava are all performed one hundred thousand times. And, of course, as good practitioners you’ll want to add more onto each of those. But it’s not just about numbers. Each time that you practice you should merge your heart and mind with the true meaning of the prayers, visualizations and meditation. That’s the right spirit in which to practice the ngöndro. In this way, it becomes the completion stage practice for all the Buddha’s teachings. This is very special.

In the nineteenth century, the famous Nyingma master Patrul Rinpoche made ngöndro one of his main practices. He was a great Dzogchen yogi, a very highly realized being, and a leading lineage master of his day. Nonetheless, he completed the ngöndro again and again.

When you begin, only do as much as you can. You don’t have to finish the accumulations in six months or even a year, but keep it up. Make the ngöndro the main part of your practice and complete it as soon as you can.

Questions and Answers:

Q: The Seven Line Prayer [*tshig bdun gsol ‘debs bzhugs so*] appears not to be a part of the ngöndro; do you recommend doing it as part of the guru yoga section anyway?

A: Yes definitely, if your time permits. It is good to include three repetitions of the Seven Line Prayer as part of the ngöndro practice and to follow it with the mantra of Guru Padmasambhava. It can be added into the section of guru yoga after the four lines that begin with DU SUM SANGYE MA LU DU PAI KU. This is very good to do. If you don’t have time to do the whole ngöndro practice, then simply begin with the guru yoga. Visualize yourself as Vajrayogini gazing upon Guru Padmasambhava and then, full of devotion, love, compassion and a feeling of closeness, chant the Seven Line Prayer three times, and recite a mala of the Twelve Syllable Mantra. Do as much as you have time for. Receive the blessings as Guru Padmasambhava dissolves back into the natural state, meditate for a few minutes and dedicate the merit.

Q: How long does it take to go through the whole thing?

A: It depends, but a good average might run about 30-40 minutes. If you put more time into the visualizations, chanting or emptiness meditation, it might be longer. When you

start, don't engage the practice for a long time, make your sessions short. As you get comfortable with it, you can add more time.

Q: Can you say more about the winds, drops and channels in relation to the inner aspect of refuge?

A: There's numerous teachings in the Vajrayana, but according to the inner tantras, the channels correspond to the nirmanakaya as do the dakinis, the wind systems correspond to the sambhogakaya as do the deities, and the essence elements of the body are dharmakaya, which also appears in the form of the lama or guru. In the tantric teachings, there are meanings and correspondences at many levels. The channels, winds and essence elements of the body are part of the dynamics of the true nature. Because of them, we are aware of the entire universe of phenomena. Without these three, nothing will arise. They reflect the subtle energy of our true nature which is projected out into many coarser forms and conditions. On the absolute level, the *rtsa*, *rlung* and *thig-le* are no other than the three kayas or the three objects of refuge.

According to Dzogchen, in the ultimate state everything is complete within *rigpa* or the true nature. Emptiness, clarity and their union are the three kayas, the three roots and the three jewels; *rigpa* itself embodies everything we've just explained: the winds, drops and channels and the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are all complete within this singularity. It's sometimes called the one-bindu state or zero condition.