

# An exploration of the *Ngondro Practices*

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The *Ngondro Practices* are usually done by a Tibetan Buddhist before he/she begins a specific deity practice. There are two divisions in the ngondro classification. The general (sometimes called outer or common) ngondro practices, and the extraordinary (sometimes called the inner or uncommon) practices. The goal of the general practices is to turn the mind away from the distractions of the world toward spiritual practice. The goal of the extraordinary practices is to purify our basic emotions.

-*Lobsang Tashi*

Tashi Delek, good morning. Today I am going to talk about the Ngondro practice. The Ngondro practice is a very, very special practice. Without having this practice, there is no way to reach enlightenment. It is very, very special. Ngondro practice is the embodiment teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha gave many different teachings, but Ngondro practice is the most condensed embodiment teaching. All of the teachings from Hinayana to Dzogchen are yoga teachings. However Ngondro, is THE condensed teaching which we can apply without neglecting any of Buddha's teachings. We do Ngondro practice both for our own enlightenment and for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Ngondro, of course, is a Tibetan word. Ngondro means going ahead. Many people maintain that Ngondro is a less important practice, kind of a pre-school practice. But these people really misunderstand. Ngondro is really an essential practice. It must be done, fully accomplished, before enlightenment can be reached. If we want to reach enlightenment, this practice must be done because Ngondro practice is the root of enlightenment.

If we want to plant a tree and have oranges, or flowers, then definitely we have to plant a seed. We can't expect fruit and flowers without planting the seed. To bear fruit the tree has to be deep rooted. Similarly, before we can reach enlightenment, Ngondro practice must be done, and must be rooted deep within our heart center.

Without paying attention to this practice, you won't get results from any other practice. You won't achieve the results you want, because you won't have the foundation. Other practices may look full of excitement, but without Ngondro it is like building a nice, fancy house without any foundation. The house won't last for a long time. The shelter would not be good for you and not good for others. The house will require a large insurance cost. Without Ngondro as a basis, other practices will bring some obstacles, not enlightenment.

This is why Ngondro is so very important. It is a foundation practice. It is a root practice. It is an essential practice. Every other practice must incorporate Ngondro practice. Only then can we reach enlightenment. Then we can be true Bodhisattvas, truly beneficial beings for all other sentient beings.

Ngondro practice is part of the Vajrayana teachings. In Vajrayana, the teacher, the guru, is very important. Of course we have many different teachers. However, all teachers can be manifestations of the state of Buddha. Particularly in Vajrayana Buddhism, your teacher directly communicates the teachings to you, brings you to the teachings, and invokes your primordial natural state. This is why we represent the teacher as Buddha.

This Ngondro text we are using has a special prayer to the Lama. We say the Lama prayer as the beginning of the Ngondro practice. For example, if we begin practice early in the morning, first we connect with the primordial wisdom mind of the Lama, then we do the Ngondro practices. We

should not do the Ngondro practices with regular mundane conceptions. We should do the Ngondro practice with the understanding that the excellent qualities of the primordial natural state are our own true nature. Thus we should do the Ngondro practice with an attitude of devotion, love, and compassion.

Now we shall delve into the text. First is the prayer calling Lamas from afar. There are three different versions of this prayer, the long version, the medium version, and the very condensed version. The version in the text we are using today is the very condensed one.

**NAMO LUMED TEN GYI GONPO LAMA KHYEN**

**Homage! Lama, infallible constant protector, (you who) know!**

If you are very busy, you can just say this line and then begin the Ngondro practice. Here you are calling the Lama from afar. Actually you are really invoking your primordial natural state of mind. This state of mind can be seen in one sense as being far away from our normal, daily state of mind. Our ignorance is really deep and is a great hindrance to reaching our primordial state of mind. On the other hand this state can be seen as right here. It is never really beyond you. It is never separated from you. It is always here. What you need to do now, is to have sincere longing, devotion, and confidence that you CAN reach your primordial state of mind which will then be your guide. The Lama is not separate from your primordial state of mind. Your primordial state of mind is your absolute teacher and will guide you through every situation.

It is not necessary to feel that you are calling the Lama from a long distance away, but having this attitude shows the extent of your devotion, your sincerity, and your desire to invoke your inner wisdom, your primordial natural state of mind. You revere your Lama, just as you revere your absolute teacher, through love, compassion, devotion, and confidence. This is why you chant the prayer to the Lama. Your duality conceptions are constantly producing obstacles, so we revere our primordial natural state in order to dispel these obstacles. Our ignorant conceptions are like helpless children. They call to the primordial wisdom state to dispel ignorance and duality. The primordial natural wisdom is like a mother to our ignorant conceptions.

This Lama prayer is part of the devotion prayers, part of the refuge prayers. It shows your confidence and understanding of the true nature of the Lama. Now we begin the Ngondro practices. The first practices are called the general Ngondro practices. These are also called developing the four reverse attitudes. These attitudes reverse your mind from its diluted phenomena state.

**DAL JOR DI NI SHIN TU NYED PAR KA**

**The freedoms and the favorable conditions  
of this (human birth) are extremely difficult to obtain.**

The first of the attitudes concerns the precious human body. The most precious human bodies are the ones benefitting all sentient beings. In general, human beings are all very special. In particular though, the most precious humans beings are those who are really working for all other sentient beings, who have positive attitudes and positive thoughts. These human beings are very rare and very precious.

There are many different qualities which make this human body very special for us. This human body, in this life situation, is free from many obstacles presented to other forms of life. With our potential for positive mind, virtue, understanding, love, and compassion, we are different from other beings. We can see and understand things deeper than some other beings. Therefore our human conditions are very special. As students of the Dharma we don't focus only on the surface level. We are looking for something deeper, and want this to happen for other sentient beings also. We are trying to reveal our natural essence. This attitude, (which we express with our body, speech, and mind) combines with all the circumstances of our human body to make this human life very very precious.

It is important to recognize just how precious this moment is. We should be happy and have joy in this. It is very important. Right now we are really free. We can do anything that we like. We have opportunity, freedom, and capabilities. Feel joy in this opportunity and be a very happy person.

#### **KYE TSHED MI TAG CHI WAI CHO CHAN YIN**

**Everything born is impermanent and bound to die.**

The second attitude is concerned with changeable natural states. Thinking about how the world is changing and moving is really very important. Everything is changing. The seasons, time, everything is always changing, not going to last beyond one moment. In gross levels, in subtle levels, everything is changing. We are also changing all the time. Even though we have gained this precious human body and all our special circumstances, these are not going to last forever. The essential changing nature is part of everything. It doesn't happen just with us. Everything is changing, what you see, what you perceive, what you think. Everything is continually moving in a changing state. This is the natural system, a law of nature. Everything has to change.

We cannot prevent or stop things from changing. Rather than moving in the direction of the change, what we do is to practice "clinging". Clinging, (attachment) means trying to hold onto things as they appear to be right now. But even though you cling, change will not stop. When we develop strong attachment to things as they appear to be right now, and then when we see them changing, we feel suffering and sadness. By our attachments we try to prevent things from changing, things which by their very nature must change. This attitude can only produce suffering. When we truly understand that everything by natural law must change, then we will understand that there isn't anything to be attached to. Without attachment we won't have too much suffering or sadness.

We must relax our mind, and let things move and change as is their nature. With this attitude we won't have worries; we won't have much suffering. You move your mind along the direction of change, because you know that change has to take place. If snow comes it's OK; that is the nature of the winter. If flowers come, that's also OK; that is the nature of spring. We move along with the changes. Along our life path, many changes will come. If your mind is open and relaxed about the changes, you will get some results.

Right now we are here. It is January 1991. In January 3091, we will all be gone. That is the nature of things. No point in worrying about it now. What we have to do is not cling to everything. We must use the opportunity of this moment. This is really most important. We should use this opportunity and take advantage. We should not miss this golden opportunity. Every time is really the right time. Use this moment as a precious moment. Use this moment to move toward your purpose. This attitude will benefit you in this lifetime as well as in the next lifetime.

#### **GE DIG LE KYI GYU DRE LU WA MED**

**The results of virtuous and unvirtuous actions (which are causes) are inexorable.**

Now we shall explore the third attitude, the cause and effect system. This is also known as the understanding of the system of the cause and effect. Everything really depends upon the cause and effect system. The law of cause and effect is always working. If a cause and condition are present, there will definitely be a result. Results must come from their causes and conditions. Right causes and conditions produce right results or effects. This never alters. This always operates. If we don't have the right causes and conditions, there will not be right results no matter how much we hope or expect them. If we have the right causes and conditions, definitely the right results will come. It is inevitable. Even if we say we don't want them, the results will definitely show up.

Inwardly everything is like this also. Positive inward causes and conditions bring positive inward results. Negative inward causes and conditions bring negative inward results. Mixed positive and negative inward causes and conditions bring mixed inward results or effects.

Knowledge of the cause and effect system is very important in Buddhism. Karma is the name of this system. You are the one who gets the results of your own causes and conditions. You are the producer of your own causes and conditions; you are therefore the producer of your own effects. Whatever you do, the results will come to you. By understanding this system, we can learn the importance of having more positive attitudes. Reduce your negative activities, and learn more positive activities. This is the lesson of this line of the text. Cause and effect are inevitable.

#### **KHAM SUM KHOR WA DUG NGAL GYA TSHOI NGANG**

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

This line of the text brings us to the fourth understanding. The reference here to suffering reminds us of the natural changing state and our mind of attachment. As long as we have attachment and clinging, we will always react, and our reactions present a lot of difficulties. By the very nature of samsara we are not comfortable all the time. Actually, because our clinging mind continually reacts to change, samsara is always uncomfortable. For as long as you don't give up your attachment and clinging, that is as long as your uncomfortable mood will stay. The whole point is that we should not be too attached to temporary sensory pleasures. They are going to change. Bring your mind more into the detached state. Then practice Dharma.

Think of all of these teachings; the precious human body, the changing impermanent state of everything, the system of cause and effect, the very nature of samsara as suffering. Don't be too attached. Use this precious opportunity. Do something good for yourself and good for others from now on. Turn your mind toward the positive. Turn your mind in the Dharma which is of benefit to you and benefit to others. Develop less grasping and clinging. For what is the real meaning of Dharma? Dharma means love and compassion, or Bodhichitta, and non-violence based on the truth. That is really Dharma. Continue on this path with your mind, speech, and body and you are turning in the Dharma.

To this point in the text we have spoken of the general Ngondro practice (the four attitudes). We have been really looking at the samsaric levels, not using any deduction, or reasoning. We have been looking at things as they are. This is the general Ngondro practice. You need a good understanding of the general practice before you can proceed.

Now we will explore the extraordinary Ngondro practice.

The first extraordinary practice is called the Refuge Practice. Refuge Practice is the root of all Buddhist practices. Refuge is the foundation of all the Buddhisms, not just for the Hinayana or the Mahayana practices.

**DI ZUNG CHANG CHUB NYING PO MA THOB BAR**  
**From now until attaining the heart of enlightenment**

**LAMA KON CHOG SUM LA KYAB SU CHI**  
**I take refuge in the Lama, the Three Jewels.**

Saying these two lines shows your determination and your devotion, as well as your confidence and your close feeling for the objects of Refuge, from this day until you reach enlightenment. The objects of refuge are the Guru, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

When we take Refuge with prayer and meditation. First we chant the Refuge lines in the text, then we do the meditation. In our meditation we visualize Guru Padmasambhava in the sky in front of us, sitting in a rainbow, sitting on a one thousand petal lotus. On the lotus are a sun and moon disc. Guru Padmasambhava sits on the moon disc, in the royal relaxing posture, wearing the different robes. Visualize this scene is being in the wisdom display. These are not solid concrete objects but rather the embodiment of all wisdom, love, and compassion.

Guru Padmasambhava is surrounded by many Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Arhats, surrounded by all the Masters. As they sit in front of you, you take this Refuge. If you have a shrine in front of you, you can mentally transform the shrine into the lotus, sun, and moon disc. Then visualize Guru Padmasambhava and all the refuge beings surrounding him, all radiating wisdom light. The shrine and all the area around it, including yourself, is thereby transformed into the palace of the pure land of Guru Padmasambhava and all the Buddhas. You also are within the palace, within the pure land. Say the refuge chant, with devotion, with joy. Then perform the prostrations.

When you do Ngondro practice you also do prostrations. Sometimes these prostrations can be done when you are doing the Guru Yoga practices. In the Ngondro practice, doing prostrations together with the refuge is correct and more practical. There are two types of prostrations, short prostrations and long prostrations. In Ngondro practice we do the long prostrations, the very extensive ones. While we are doing the physical prostrations, we chant the refuge prayer and do the visualization meditation at the same time.

To do the physical prostration we stand straight up and fold our hands at the heart center. Our feet may be close together. This mudra is called the Mudra of the Blossoming Lotus, or The Wish-fulfilling Mudra. This mudra is a symbol of the heart. You are opening your heart toward Guru Padmasambhava and the Three Jewels.

Now put your folded hands on the crown chakra, then on the speech chakra, then on the heart chakra. Bow down on the floor. In the short prostration your five points must touch on the floor. The five points are the forehead, the two palms, and the two knees. All five points must touch the floor. In the long prostration, you slide completely onto the floor. It's like swimming on the floor (laughter); with all of your body touching the floor. Next swing back and stand up.

To begin the second prostration, your hands don't have to start at the heart center. They can go right to the crown chakra. Repeat the prostrations again, and again, and again. With the long prostration, you stretch out all the way. Your belly, your knees, your forehead, your body, all of you touching the floor. When you are getting up from the long prostration it is all right for your knees to be on the floor. Doing many long prostrations can be difficult at first. Although it wasn't designed for exercise, this is a good side effect of doing prostrations. It is a lot of exercise. Many people have said that when they do one hundred thousand prostrations over a short period of time, their bodies become very light. They find it very good for arthritic joint pains.

In Tibet the people do a lot of prostrations. Sometimes they perform the long prostrations all the way from their homes in eastern Tibet to Lhasa. By this practice they are making a strong connection between their own body and the very famous statue of the Buddha called the Jowo Rinpoche in Lhasa. It is said that this statue was consecrated by the Buddha himself. Guru Padmasambhava and many great masters have also concentrated this statue. In Lhasa the Jowo statue at the Jokang temple is a central focus for pilgrimages. So some people do long prostrations all the way from Eastern Tibet to Lhasa. This type of pilgrimage may take years to complete. After a trip like this their bodies become very light. They say that they have to carry something heavy on their backs to hold them down on the ground. (laughter)

Next we shall discuss the Generation of Bodhicitta.

**DA NE ZUNG TE KHOR WA MA TONG BAR**

**From now until samsara becomes empty**

**MA GYUR SEM CHAN KUN GYI PHAN DE DRUB**

**I shall accomplish the benefits and happiness of all sentient parent beings.**

While we say this Bodhicitta prayer, we should continue to hold in mind the refuge visualization which we generated earlier. The objects of Refuge now become the objects of Bodhicitta. In front of Guru Padmasambhava and all the Buddhas, you take these Bodhicitta vows, Bodhicitta precepts. Having Bodhicitta extends your attitude of love, compassion and wisdom to all sentient beings without any exceptions. Having Bodhicitta means maintaining this attitude until all sentient beings are completely liberated from suffering and their deluded states. Your courage, commitment, love and compassion must be continued for that long, without any expectations. By taking Bodhicitta vows, you show the extent of your courage and commitment. You desire to bring all sentient beings into a joyful state. You show the extent of your love, compassion, and wisdom.

The practice of Bodhicitta is called The Special Practice of the Mahayana. Mahayana is a Sanskrit word. *Maha* means great and *iyana* means vehicle. Mahayana is Great Vehicle Buddhism, and it is Bodhicitta that makes the vehicle so great. This is very important. The school which teaches the great Bodhicitta technique is the Mahayana school. Without Bodhicitta there is no way to gain enlightenment. No matter which school of Mahayana teaching you study, without Bodhicitta, love, compassion, and wisdom, there is no way to reach enlightenment.

Bodhicitta is the very root of enlightenment, the root of Buddhahood, the root of benefit for all sentient beings, the root of all happiness and joy. Practice understanding, love, compassion, and wisdom for the benefit of all sentient beings. We say these lines of the Bodhicitta prayer in front of the objects of refuge as witnesses. In front of the objects of refuge we generate love and compassion again and again and again.



The next Ngondro practice in the text is that of Mandala offerings.

**TSHE RAB KUN GYI LU DANG LONG CHOD PAL**

**The bodies enjoyments, possessions, (and) glories of the succession of all my lifetimes**

**TSHOG NYI DZOG CHIR KON CHOG SUM LA BUL**

**I offer to the three jewels in order to complete the two accumulations.**

Mandala is a sanskrit word which means entirely, completely, totally, without missing anything. Offering the Mandala you are offering the entire universe. Whatever you can imagine, whatever you can think of, offer these to Guru Padmasambhava and the three Jewels. Make your offerings to all the great Masters, Buddhas and Bodisattvas.

In the long Mandala practice, the grains of rice and all the rings and circles symbolizes the complete cosmos, the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the earth, water, oceans, sentient beings, galaxies, everything. In the short mandala practice which we do daily, we perform the Mudra of the Mandalas. The mudra also symbolizes the complete cosmos. The center of the mudra is called the center mountain, the mountain called Sumeru. The four corners of the mudra symbolize the four continents, the four directions. Visualizing the cosmos represented by this mudra, you say the offering lines.

Mandala offerings are also known as part of the generosity practices. You make these offerings to the Realization Beings through your own generosity. By making mandala offerings, you accumulate the two types of merits, wisdom merit, and accumulation merit. Wisdom merit depends mainly on meditation and your deepening understanding of your true wisdom nature. Accumulation merit comes from your generosity, your devotion, your loving and compassionate attitude toward all sentient beings. By Mandala offerings you gather meritorious energy to yourself, which you can then share with all sentient beings through dedication. By dedicating the merit you have gained for the benefit of all sentient beings, you dispel your own ignorance and obscurations.

This is the teaching on the Mandala offerings.

The fourth practice is called meditation on Vajrasattva.

**CHI WOR LAMA DOR SEM YER MED PAI**

**Above one's head is Vajrasattva, inseparable from the Lama.**

**KU LE DUD TSI GYUN BAB DRIB JANG GYUR**

**From (Vajrasattva's) body, a nectar stream descends, purifying (my) obscurations.**

Vajrasattva is no other than Guru Padmasambhava; therefore Vajrasattva is also your teacher. Guru Vajrasattva is a totally enlightened being and has the special power to remove obscurations. When we meditate as Guru Padmasambhava we are meditating on the Nirmanakaya Guru. Vajrasattva is a Sambogakaya Guru. Guru Padmasambhava and Guru Vajrasattva are the same, there is no difference between them. In this visualization we see Guru Padmasambhava transform into Vajrasattva. Then we meditate on Vajrasattva.

Visualize Vajrasattva above your head so that you both are facing in the same direction. In the refuge visualization, the objects of refuge face you. This time you and Vajrasattva both face the same direction. Above your head is a one thousand petal white lotus. Above the lotus is a moon disk, and on the moon disc sits Vajrasattva in vajra posture. This visualization is not of solid objects. Vajrasattva and his consort appear in wisdom rainbow bodies. Vajrasattva and his consort are in union. Both are white in color. It is a rich white color, like when a snow covered mountain is touched by moon light, a very rich, bright white. Seeing Vajrasattva as the embodiment of all the Buddhas, of all the Buddha families, know that Vajrasattva is also of the same nature as Guru Padmasambhava.

Then remain just as you are, in meditation, nothing else has to change. Recite the 100 syllable mantra of Vajrasattva. When you begin the recitation of the mantra, invoke the blessings of the male and female bodies of Vajrasattva as they extend bliss in all directions. Blessing nectar starts to descend from Vajrasattva in the form of light and enters your central channel through the crown chakra. The light fills your crown chakra, pushing away all obscurations, obstacles, and diseases. The light nectar gradually descends to your speech chakra, filling that chakra and pushing out all negativities, diseases and obstacles. The light nectar then fills your entire body, and you become as completely pure and clean as Vajrasattva. Your entire body is filled with the wisdom light nectar of the Vajrasattvas.

Each time you say the 100 syllable mantra, see yourself receiving more and more nectar, becoming more and more purified, losing more and more obscurations, obstacles, and diseases. Continue reciting this mantra with a single pointed mind, great devotion, and sharp concentration.

OM VAJRASATTVA SAMAYA MANU PALAYA  
VAJRASATTVA TE NO PA TISHTHA DRI DHO ME BHA WA  
SU TO KHAYO ME BHA WA  
SU PO KHAYO ME BHA WA  
ANU RAKTO ME BHA WA  
SARWA SIDDHIM ME PRA YATSA  
SARWA KARMA SU TSA ME  
TSITTAM SHRE YAM KURU HUNG  
HA HA HA HA HO!  
BHA GA WAN  
SARWA TA THA GATA VAJRA MA ME MUN TSA VAJRI BHA WA  
MAHA SAMAYA SATTVA AH

Supreme praise to the Vajrasattva samayas. Grant your protection Vajrasattva. Remain firm in me. Make me totally satisfied. Increase the positive within me. Be loving towards me. Bestow all the Accomplishments as well as all the activities. Make my mind virtuous! From my heart I will have great joy in the Four Boundless, Four Empowerments, Four Joys, and the Four Kayas. Bhagawan, All the Tathagatas, Vajrasattva, don't abandon me. I pray that I may become a Vajra Holder. Great Samaya Sattva! AH! (signifying the non-duality of all.)

After recitation of the long mantra, you should feel that Vajrasattva smiles and says "oh noble daughter (or noble son).. now you have been completely purified of all obscurations, obstacles, and diseases." After saying this both Vajrasattvas melting into light and the light flows down to your heart center. In that moment you become Vajrasattva, and the entire universe is transformed into the pure land of Vajrasattva. Understanding this fully, recite the short mantra of Vajrasattva for as long as you have time.

OM VAJRASATTVA HUM

Visualize yourself as Vajrasattva dissolving into the primordial natural state. You have no more perceptions, no more concentration, no more thinking. You merge with the primordial natural state and remain in that state for as much time as you can.

OD ZHU DAG NANG DANG DRE RO CHIG GYUR

(Vajrasattva) melts into light and becomes mingled in one taste with one's own perceptions.

Now comes the practice of Guru Yoga.

**RANG NYID DORJE NALJOR DUN KHA RU**  
**Oneself (is) Vajrayogini and in the sky in front**

When we practice Guru Padmasambhava Yoga, our task is to completely change our frame of reference. This means that we ignore our mundane conceptions of who we think we are. These self-impressions exist only on the surface. In Guru Yoga we return to our primordial natural state. We stop seeing ourselves and all things around us on the surface level. We see ourselves as Vajrayogini. We see all external things as part of the pure land of Vajrayogini. Vajrayogini is the primordial natural wisdom state. We appear as the wisdom rainbow body Vajrayogini, wisdom mother of all the Buddhas, mother of all the realization beings. With an understanding of this primordial wisdom nature, we can invoke the true nature of the Buddha.

Logically therefore, our understanding the true nature of the Buddha is dependent upon our understanding of the true primordial wisdom nature. Guru Padmasambhava and Vajrayogini are of the same nature. Every time we practice Guru Yoga with this understanding, we gain more experience of the primordial wisdom nature.

As we end our Ngondro practices we must dedicate the benefits we have gained for the welfare of all sentient beings. Dedication motivation is very special. It is part of Bodhicitta practice as well. Dedication is very powerful. Even though you can't see its effect immediately, dedication definitely has an effect on subtle levels. Do not ignore good motivation and dedication. These definitely help on subtle levels and blossom into the gross levels. The Buddha always mentioned how important dedication was.

Even in the regular world in which we live, we should have good intentions for others. If somebody has best wishes for us, we might feel happy. Our happiness is an effect of the intention of the good wish. If somebody curses you or has bad wishes for you, you feel upset. So the bad wishes also have their effect. It is your intention in your actions that is very special, for intention goes much deeper than physical activity. Our intention really changes the focus of our actions and speech. Therefore our intention must be very pure and positive. Pure and positive intention leads to beneficial activities that will change the world, will bring peace and harmony to the world.

This is the teaching on the Ngondro Practice.