

2014 Ngondro Retreat Teaching, Part I

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When you are reciting the ngondro verses, don't just think about the recitation. Ngondro is not just the words. You have to look into the meaning of the words, which is very profound. Everything is included in the ngondro. The entire path is included in ngondro. Most people don't think about this. Most people ignore the ngondro. Once they have finished with their accumulation of 500,000, they throw it away like toilet paper. Then they start complaining, asking why they don't have any success, why can't they tame their minds, why can't they do practice correctly? The answer is, you have thrown away your ngondro, what do you expect?

If you are really practicing ngondro, you will notice the results. This doesn't mean that there will be great earthquakes and rainbows in the sky. What you will notice is that you will be able to drop your obsession with samsara a little bit. This is more important than having a famous name or being renowned as an exceptional scholar or accomplished practitioner. You will see the effect in your own mind: your attraction to and fascination with samsara will diminish, and the dharma will gain greater prominence. The dharma will naturally come to the forefront as that which you take delight in, that which brings you joy, that in which you have interest. You will look to the dharma more and more as your source of happiness. It will become like your mommy and your daddy.

But people don't want to look directly at samsara, which is what the ngondro asks us to do. The only way we will drop samsara is if we look directly at it and see its nature. We don't want to look at its nature, because its nature is suffering! Its nature is that it will always betray us. If we are still fascinated by samsara, it is because we haven't seen its nature. Mostly we refuse to look at samsara's nature; we would rather cover it up and then cover it up again, like when snow falls and covers everything evenly so it all looks clean and white and beautiful. It seems that the cover, the snow, actually made everything clean and pure because it is white everywhere. That is fine. However, as soon as it melts, I'm sorry, everything is muddy and yucky and worse than before. It turns out the snow didn't make everything pure, it just covered up the mess. In a short time that nature is revealed again. Our fascination with samsara covers up its nature the same way, but if we look at samsara, its nature is easy to see.

First we have to look: what is the nature of samsara? What drives samsara? What are these five poisons? What is their nature? Are they of benefit to us or not? Is it harmful to harbor them in your mind or not? What is this that traps us here, in samsara's suffering?

What is this desire? Do we have desire? What kind of desire? From desire, we will have jealousy, from jealousy we will become involved in all kinds of politics, from politics we will become more and more angry, and the basis of this whole process is ignorance. It is stupidity. Why are we in samsara? Because we are stupid! We think we are SO smart, but actually we are the most stupid. We need to meditate more and more, and that doesn't mean just sitting, eyes and mouth open, spaced out. It means asking yourself in a really honest way--not in a lawyerly way or a politician's way, but a really honest way--"What kind of desire do I have? Desire is the root of samsara. What kinds of desires do I have? What are they doing for me? Is that desire benefitting me or harming me? My desire--for money, for position, for political power, for a man, for a woman, for food or music or anything--is that bringing me harm or bringing me benefit? Is that desire useful?"

When we look at our desire, yes, absolutely it seems useful. ...For about five minutes. Maybe an hour, tops. Then it's going to be harmful. If your desire is useful to you for five minutes, then it is going to be harmful for an hour, I guarantee it. Stage by stage if you do your ngondro very well, you will start to see through the illusion of samsara. There is nothing here that is going to benefit you! There is nothing here that is going to help you! It is like having fallen into a sewer and being surrounded by poison, and everyone is splashing around thinking everything is so wonderful. Each person is saying, "I am the cleanest!" "I am the cleanest!" and actually they have shit all over them.

Everything is included in the ngondro. People say, "I have done my ngondro," meaning now they are finished with it and, like toilet paper, they are throwing it away. Everyone wants to just swallow the ngondro without actually chewing it or tasting it. They close their eyes and do the mandala offerings as fast as they can, just trying to rack up the numbers. What happens when you swallow something? Next time you see it, it's in the toilet, right? Chew it before you swallow it! Don't be in such a rush to swallow it without tasting or experiencing it. If you hastily swallow the ngondro by only focusing on accumulating the numbers and then disregard it once you are finished, that is like sending all the Buddha's teachings right into the toilet without bothering to taste them, savor them, or extract the essence from them at all.

Think about this, while you have this opportunity for a few days to practice the ngondro. Your mind should be getting more soft, more flexible and open as you practice. You should be hiding fewer and fewer of your faults. If you are not practicing sincerely, you will find your mind getting more and more stuck and abrasive, like a great, dry horn. The animals with such big horns are just targets for hunters. In your case, who are the hunters? The hunters are your own poisons, hunting for whatever weakness you have, whatever way they can bind you into samsara again. We see the

deer in the fall being chased by hunters and we think, "Poor deer!" The bigger horns they have, the more the hunters will chase them. We think, "Poor deer with such big horns! All the horns do is give them a headache, and the hunters will kill them for their horns!" We see the problem for the deer of having large horns. But for the deer, they think that their horns are the most wonderful thing. They grow them proudly, they wear them proudly, they fight with them proudly. Our own egos are like our horns. If our dharma practice is only giving us bigger horns, then we are like those deer, proud of our biggest fault, our biggest obstacle. Any buddha or bodhisattva, anyone who understands the nature of samsara a little bit, looking at us would think, "Poor sentient beings, with their giant ego horns! Don't they know that their horns only bring them trouble? They don't know that if only they dropped their horns, nobody would hunt them, nothing would give them a headache: they would really feel a lot better!" We can't imagine that. We are just proud, proud to have our big ego horns.

I am not just saying this is your problem, or students' problem in general. It is a problem for lamas, too. Some lamas have a big name, and that big name is not only no use at all, it is actually harmful. That name or position is like their horn. The name "scholar" or "practitioner" is really just the name that brings them jealousy, anger, pride--every kind of samsaric trap. Poor sentient beings, even sentient beings with the name of "lama"!

These are the bubbles of samsaric pleasure: they will pop, and pop quickly. They do us no good at all. Look at them, seemingly so important: being famous, being handsome or smart, being pretty or rich, being slick and having lots of boyfriends and girlfriends. This is all useless at the moment of your death! This is all completely unhelpful in real dharma practice. Give me the ugliest practitioner, one who has faith and trust, someone who is really working to tame their own mind, someone who is understanding the meaning more and more, subduing their five poisons more and more, understanding the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha more and more, having more and more compassion for sentient beings, ugly and wretched like themselves, who has a deeper and deeper appreciation of the Three Jewels--to them I say, "Thank you." Thank you for your sincere practice; I don't care about your ugliness. That is what I think, anyway.

Everyone wants to take good care of themselves: take care of their body, their face, their makeup, their hair. Actually we should be taking care regarding the law of cause and effect. We should be watching carefully so that we will be clean and beautiful when it comes to our karma. How do we learn how to take care regarding our karma, to make ourselves beautiful and presentable karmically and stop making mistakes? I'm sorry,

but you have to do the ngondro. I don't care how high your name is or what you think you have learned, you have to do the ngondro.

The sign of really making progress is not how high your name or position is. It is how far down you have come into humility. When you come down into humbleness, that is where your qualities can develop, like seeds in a well-fertilized field.

However much you are satisfied, that is how much success you will have. If you are never satisfied, you will never be successful. I knew one little girl who used to say "More! More!" to everybody: "Mommy! More! More! Daddy! More! More! Doggie! More! More!" We are all exactly like that. We just want more, and more, and more. That is why we never find success. In this whole country, everyone is fighting for more, more, more...and nobody is getting anything! Didn't anybody notice that nobody got anything? Now that we have this chance to practice, we should try to have more, more, more practice, and understand more, more, more meaning. Then we will see how useless samsara is. Samsara IS useless! Samsara will not benefit you! Samsara has no essence! Samsara only brings harm! It is just like the giant horns on your head. How are you going to recognize that? You will only recognize it through doing ngondro.

Without having done ngondro, we are still dazzled by samsara. Through the ngondro, you can see samsara's nature, and then you might say, "Look at that pretty lady... ghost." "Look at that handsome guy...demon." "Look at all the cute children... zombies." But nobody says that, seeing clearly, because nobody understands that until they do ngondro sincerely. We just look at the prettiness or the handsomeness and stop there. We think that's it, that's the all-important quality.

When you are filled with poisons, everything you touch and see will be poisonous too. If you are filled with samsara's poisons, everyone you encounter will be a demon or demoness, an evil spirit come to afflict you. Is that because they have a problem? No. It is because you have a problem. Your poisons, your demons. I'm sorry, but you can't blame the demons. Where do you think demons come from? It is your poisons that make them. They come from your own brain, which you are so happy to fill with the five poisons. You might think, "Oh, there are only five. No problem. I will kill my five demons and then have breakfast." I'm sorry, but the five poisons have many branches, there are many demon armies waiting, and they will tell you many wonderful things. If you practice dharma sincerely, though, and without ego, then whatever the demons are telling you or however they are trying to persuade you, you will not listen to a word that they say. Your mind will be filled with the sound of the Buddha's speech instead.

This is why I am so happy that you are practicing the ngondro and that this retreat happens every year. Thank you, Matthew, our funky army teacher, for always teaching and reminding everyone of the meaning. Please, everyone, take those teachings to heart. We are here practicing in order to recognize the meaning. The ngondro gives us the framework or structure, the words to say to remind us of the meaning of the practice, but we have to connect the words we are saying with our mouths to the meaning, to whatever understanding we have in our brains and hearts. Otherwise we are just doing mouth ngondro. It is very easy to just recite mouth ngondro, receive mouth empowerment and mouth transmission, or do mouth puja, but this is not dharma. Dharma isn't to do with the mouth. Dharma is to do with the mind. If you are only using your mouth, that is not dharma.

--(to be continued)