



Dzogchen View of Tantric Ngöndro—A Teaching by Kyabjé Dudjom Rinpoché

Whatever the practice with which we engage—relative truth and absolute truth coexist. Method and wisdom coexist. Experiences and emptiness coexist. Because this is the nature of the reality—as we experience it—the practice of tantric ngöndro exists as a method for realizing the beginningless enlightened state.

The final phase of tantric ngöndro—*lama'i naljor*—is the quintessence of ngöndro and of tantra. In the practice of lama'i naljor (guru yoga) we reach this level of wisdom when the lama (guru) dissolves and becomes one with us. At this point we remain in the absolute nature of things—which is the actual state of meditation *as it is*—as it is transmitted in dzogchen.

At the beginning of the tantric ngöndro we invoke the presence of the lama. Since the lama is the one who exemplifies both the qualities of the path and goal, we acknowledge the lama as the beginning and end of all practice.

After having commenced our practice by acknowledging the lama, we consider the difficulty of gaining human rebirth—in terms of having the conducive circumstances to practice. Human rebirth is the basis of the spiritual path of liberation and is, therefore, precious and worthy of great respect. If we do not value the situation in which we have found ourselves, then we will not make use of our precious circumstances and a great opportunity will be squandered.

Then we consider impermanence and death. Everything that exists is subject to change and dissolution. Even though we die, we do not find freedom simply by losing our physical form. We just go on circling in samsaric vision, taking countless other forms according to our patterned perception. The nature of samsāra is the experience of unsatisfactoriness that arises through the attempt to maintain the illusion of duality. We contemplate that.

Then we reflect upon our conditioning—the pattern of our karmic vision. We recognize the manner in which our perception and responses are all governed by dualistic conditioning that is so difficult to undermine.

These are called the *lo tog nam zhi*—the four thoughts that turn the mind toward practice. Their purpose is to encourage the attention away from compulsive patterning and re-patterning. It is important to dwell on the *lo tog nam zhi* at the beginning of our practice in order to generate the appropriate motivation for practice.

Practicing in this way is like smoothing out a ploughed field to make it even and ready for sowing. Then we need to sow the seed itself. To sow the seed is to receive refuge; to generate bodhicitta; to offer *kyil'khor* (maṇḍala)—for the accumulation of causes conducive to the fulfillment of method and wisdom—and purification through Dorjé Sempa (Vajrasattva) recitation. These practices are like seeds sown in the ground—made ready by the contemplation of the *lo tog nam zhi*.

From the perspective of the relative condition—in which we find ourselves—it is not possible to realize the absolute nature of reality without relating with what is relative. Without using the relative situation as a basis we cannot realize *sem-nyid*—the nature of the mind. In the same way, without this relative practice, we cannot directly apprehend the nature of emptiness. The relative and absolute coexist—they go hand in hand; it is really very important indeed to realize this.

Let us now look at refuge. At the external level there is the *Könchog Sum*—the Three Jewels of *sang-gyé* (Buddha), *chö* (Dharma) and *gendün* (Sangha). Sang-gyé is the source of chö. Those whose minds are turned towards chö are gendün.

Because we exist in duality we experience delusory dissatisfaction. Because of this, we take refuge in order to be freed from the experience of self-generated dissatisfaction. Due to misapprehending our true nature—because of the delusory appearances that arise when the various elements coalesce in accordance with patterns of dualistic confusion—this human body becomes the container of endless dualistic projections. It becomes a source of attachment, in terms of supplying delusory definitions of existence. This attachment remains very strong until we see the true nature of existence. Until we are completely freed from the delusion that our

body validates our existence, dissatisfaction will continually color our experience. Because of this, Kōnchog Sum exists as a focus of refuge.

So, externally speaking, one should take refuge in sang-gyé, chö, and gendün with devotion. But internally, sang-gyé, chö, and gendün are symbolic. They are a profound and skillful way to lead us out of this self-created, illusory saṃsāra.

From the dzogchen point of view, sang-gyé, chö, and gendün are within us. On the absolute level, this mind of ours—that is empty of all referential coordinates—is in itself sang-gyé (buddha nature). Externally, chö manifests as sound and meaning—we hear it and we practice it. But from an internal point of view, chö is empty. In essence, it is the unceasing, unobstructed, self-luminous display of rigpa. Externally, gendün comprises those whose minds turn toward the chö. But internally, gendün is the all-pervading, all-encompassing aspect of mind.

The Kōnchog Sum is fully accomplished within us. However, since we do not recognize this, we need to take refuge in the external sang-gyé, chö, and gendün. When we practice tantric ngöndro properly we visualize Padmasambhava with fervent devotion. We perform prostrations in humility with our body and we recite the refuge formula with our speech. Then, when we sit in silence at the end of our practice—and dissolve the visualization into ourselves—we realize that all these three things—subject, object, and activity—are none other than rigpa! The meditation is oneself; Padmasambhava is one own's rigpa. Just remain in the nature of rigpa. Other than rigpa, there is nothing to find!

Buddha Śākyamuni said in the *Do-de Kalpa Zangpo (Bhadrakalpikasūtra)*: *I manifested in a dreamlike way to dreamlike beings and gave a dreamlike chö, but in reality I never taught and never actually came.* From the viewpoint of Buddha Śākyamuni, who never came and gave the chö—all is mere perception—existing only in the apparent sphere of suchness.

As regards to the practice of refuge, the relative aspect is the object of refuge to which we offer devotion and prostrations and so on. The absolute aspect is without effort. When we dissolve the visualization and remain in the *natural, effortless state of mind*, the concept of refuge no longer exists.

The generation of *chang chub sem* (bodhicitta)—enlightenment mind—means that if we just act for ourselves alone we are not following the path of chö and our enlightenment is blocked. It is of the utmost importance that we generate the enlightened thought to free all beings from saṃsāra. Beings are as limitless as the sky. They have all been our fathers and mothers. They have all suffered in this saṃsāra that we all fabricate from the ground of being. So the thought of freeing them from this suffering really is very powerful. Without this, we have the deluded concept that we are separate from all sentient beings.

The enlightened thought—in the words of the chang chub sem vow—is: *From now until saṃsāra is empty I shall work for the benefit of all beings who have been my fathers and mothers.* So from the relative point of view, there *are* sentient beings to be liberated, there *is* compassion to be generated, and there *is* an I who generates compassion. The way of generating and showing compassion was actually explained by Buddha Śākyamuni himself. Such is the relative chang chub sem.

So in this relative practice of chang chub sem, we visualize all beings and generate the enlightened thought. We try to free them from all suffering until enlightenment is reached. We recite the generation of chang chub sem as many times as our practice requires. The instruction—according to the teachings on the development of chang chub sem—is that we must exchange our own happiness for the pain of others. As we breathe out we give all our happiness and joy—and even their causes—to all sentient beings. As we breathe in we take on all their pain and suffering so that they can be free of it. This practice is also very important. Without the development of chang chub sem and without freeing ourselves from our attachment—to the form display of emptiness—we cannot attain enlightenment. It is because of our inability to show compassion to others and because of being attached to the concept of ourselves that we are not free of dualism. All these things are the relative aspects of the practice of chang chub sem.

As regards the absolute aspect of chang chub sem, Buddha Śākyamuni said to his disciple Rabjor: *All phenomena are like an illusion and a dream.* The reason why the Buddha said this is that whatever manifests is subject to change and dissolution; nothing is inherently solid, permanent, separate, continuous, or defined. If we see the world as solid, we tie ourselves up with a rope of entanglement and are constrained and pulled—like a dog—by compulsion as our lead. We get drawn into activities that can never be finished—that is why saṃsāra is apparently endless.

We might think that because saṃsāra is like a dream, perhaps enlightenment is solid and permanent. But Buddha Śākyamuni said that nirvāṇa itself is like a dream—an illusion. There is nothing that can be named which is nirvāṇa; nothing called nirvāṇa which is tangible.

Buddha Śākyamuni said this directly: *Form is emptiness.* For instance, the moon is reflected in water, but there is no moon in the water; there never has been! There is no form that can be grasped. It is empty. Then Buddha Śākyamuni went on to say: *Emptiness itself is form.* Emptiness itself has appeared in the manner of form. We cannot find emptiness apart from form. We cannot separate the two. We cannot grasp them as separate entities. The moon is reflected in the water, but the water is not the moon. The moon is not the water, yet we cannot separate water and moon. Once we have understood this at the level of experience, there is no saṃsāra. In the realm of realization there is neither saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa. According to dzogchen, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are just another dualistic concept.

But when looking at this moon in the water, we might say: *But it is there, I can see it.* But when we reach for it and try to touch it—it is not there. It is the same with the thoughts that arise in our mind. So if we ask: *How has this actually come about?* We need to consider that everything comes from interdependent origination. So what is this interdependent origination? It is simply that the moon and water do not exist separately. The clear water is the primary cause; the moon is the secondary or contributory cause. When these two causes meet, then this interdependent origination manifests. It is the coincidental appearance of the primary cause and the contributory cause.

To put it directly, the primary cause or basis of saṃsāra is duality—the artificial separation of emptiness and form. From this all manifestations become contributory causes within the framework of karmic vision. They meet together and bring about the manifestation of saṃsāra—as long as we attach to the form display of emptiness as a definition of being. Everything that

we experience as saṃsāra exists only within this interdependent pattern. We must be quite sure of this! When we go further—and examine the nature of interdependent origination—we find that it is none other than emptiness. Therefore, apart from emptiness, there is no chö. The ultimate view of Thegchen (Mahāyāna) is emptiness, but this viewpoint does not exist in the lower teachings.

If we really look into our experience of existence with the eye of meditation, we begin to see everything as the play of emptiness. Phenomena—as referential coordinates—become exhausted and we finally arrive at their essential nature—emptiness. But, having said this, we might be led to say: *In that case we should not need anything.* But whether you need anything or not is up to you. It simply depends on your mind. Just dryly talking of emptiness is not enough. We must actualize it and then see for ourselves. If our mind is really empty of referential manipulation, then there is no hope, no fear, no negativity—mind is free of that. It is like waving your hand in the sky. Whatever arises is completely unobstructed.

The purpose of meditation is to remain in this natural state. In that state all phenomena are directly realized in their essential emptiness. That is why we practice meditation. Meditation purifies everything into its empty nature. First, we must realize that the absolute, natural state of things is empty. Then, whatever manifests is the play of the dharmakāya. Out of the empty nature of existence arise all the relative manifestations from which we fabricate saṃsāra. We need to understand quite clearly how things are in reality and how they appear in terms of duality. It is very important to have this view, because without this view our meditation becomes dull. Just simply sitting and saying: *It's all empty* is like putting a little cup upside down. That little, empty space in the cup remains a very narrow, limited emptiness. You cannot even drink tea from it!

It is essential to actually know the heart of the matter as it is. In the absolute sense there are no sentient beings who experience dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction is as empty as the clear sky, but because of attachment to the form display of emptiness—interdependent origination—the relative sphere of things becomes an illusory trap in which there are sentient beings who experience dissatisfaction. This is the meaning of saṃsāra.

In expressing the essential quality of the great mother—emptiness—it is said: *Though you think of expressing the nature of the Heart Sutra you cannot put it into words.* It is totally beyond utterance, beyond thought, beyond concept. It was never born. It has never died. If we ask what it is like, it is like the sky. We can never find the limit of the sky. We can never find the center of the sky. So this sky-like nature is symbolic of emptiness—it is spacious, limitless, and free—with infinite depth and infinite expanse.

But having said this, we might say: *So rigpa—the nature of our own mind—is like the sky, and, therefore, free from all limitations.* But this is not it either. It is not just empty. If you look into it there is something to see. *See* is just a word we have to use in order to communicate. But we can see that. We can meditate on that. We can rest in that—and in whatever arises in that spacious condition. If we see the true nature of emptiness and form as nondual—as it really is—this is the mother of all the buddhas. All this chatter has been an elaboration of the absolute chang chub sem.

Next is the purification through Dorjé Sempa (Vajrasattva). In the absolute sense there is nothing to purify, no one who could purify us, and no purification. But since beings are apparently unable to leave it at that, matters become a little bit more complicated. Obscurations and dualistic confusions arise as the consequence of clinging to the form display of emptiness.

In the illusory perception of this grasping at the form display of emptiness, we subject ourselves to endless dissatisfaction. Because of this, purification becomes a relative skillful means. In order to purify our delusions, Dorjé Sempa yab-yum (Vajrasattva in union as father-mother deity) arises from our own true state of rigpa and the flow of nectar from the secret kyil'khor of their union completely purifies our obscurations. We enter into the visualization and recite the hundred-syllable mantra; and this is the means of purification. In the natural state of things—in the state of what is—everything is pure from the very beginning like the sky. This is the absolute purification of Dorjé Sempa.

Now we come to the offering of the kyil'khor (maṇḍala). The kyil'khor is offered for the accumulation of auspicious causes. Why do we need to accumulate auspicious causes? It is because of grasping at the form display of emptiness that illusory saṃsāra has come about; so we need to practice giving everything up. Because there is illusion, there is a way of purifying illusion; therefore, we can utilize this as a relative skillful means. Because we can purify, there is also a way of accumulating auspicious causes. When we offer *my body, my possessions, and my merit*, this is the relative, symbolic offering of the kyil'khor. From the absolute point of view, these things are empty—like the clear, empty sky. So if you remain in the state of primordial awareness that is the absolute kyil'khor offering and the absolute accumulation of auspicious causes.

Then there is the practice of lama'i naljor (guru yoga). Due to clinging to the form display of emptiness, the lama (guru) appears as one who inspires purity of mind. He or she is the object toward whom one feels purely. Because clinging obscures the mind—and because we feel purity of perception toward the lama—both we and the lama appear to exist in the sphere of dualism—as if the fundamental nature of our mind within the dharmakāya sphere were different. Therefore, externally, we visualize the lama with great devotion. Then we receive the empowerment of his or her nondual condition.

These are all the external, relative practices of lama'i naljor in which we have invoked the wisdom presence of the symbolic apparent lama. Then we recite the vajra words: *The lama dissolves into light and unites with my very being*. See! The *one taste* of rigpa and emptiness is the actual face of the lama.

If you ask where the absolute lama is, he or she is nowhere else but there—in the absolute nature of the mind. The absolute state of rigpa is where the lama is fully accomplished as primordial wisdom and clear space. Continuing in the awareness of *how it is*—simply this is the dzogchen practice of lama'i naljor.

This is how the outer tantric ngöndro relates to the inner ngöndro in terms of the teaching of ati-yoga.

Transcribed by Ngak'chang Rinpoché from oral teachings given by Kyabjé Dudjom Rinpoché in Boudhanath, Kathmandu, Nepal, in 1971.