

Introduction to the Practice of the Longchen Nyingtik Ngöndro

Introduction

For the NDG practice of the Longchen Nyingtik ngöndro, we are using Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's arrangement, and for the English translation we can use that of the Nalanda Translation Committee or the one by Rigpa Translations. This ngöndro has two main sections: the first is called the General Preliminaries, and the second is called the Special Preliminaries. The General Preliminaries are usually the practice of reflecting on the four mind changes, namely 1) precious human rebirth, 2) impermanence and death, 3) the suffering of samsara, and 4) karma, the law of cause and effect. However practically speaking, as found in the *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, we add to these four main "mind changes" the topics of "The Benefits of Liberation" and "How to Follow a Spiritual Friend".

The Special Preliminaries consists of five sections: 1) Taking Refuge which is the entrance into being a practicing Buddhist; 2) Developing Bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, which is cultivating the courageous mind of selfless enlightenment; 3) the Meditation and Recitation Practice of Vajrasattva, which is purifying all what obscures us; 4) Mandala Offering, the practice of infinite offering, generating the resources and conditions for the path to enlightenment; and 5) the practice of Guru Yoga, mingling one's mind with the Vajrayana guru's wisdom, which is the culmination of the gradual path, and the foundation for the Vajrayana.

Yoga of Waking Up

At the very start of the ngöndro, you have the *yoga of awakening* (*ldang ba'i rnal 'byor*) in the morning. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's instructs on how to meditate the very moment you wake up in the morning. (Note that these additional instructions by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo are the non-indented text in the Rigpa translation and the italicized text in the Nalanda translation.) The yoga of waking up directs your mind to the fresh state of meditation before the ordinary conceptions begin to corrupt and afflict the mind. As the instructions detail, within the realm of the guru and accompanying dakas and dakinis, you expel the karmic prana according to the instructions, and settle the mind. You then bless the speech, according to the corresponding liturgy found in the text. In the Rigpa translation, this begins "OM AH HUM From the syllable RA□...", while in the Nalanda this section begins with "OM AH HUM Fire arising from the syllable RA□..." Doing this first thing in the morning is very important. You can take some 5-10

minutes on this, and then either continue with the session preliminaries, or you can make your shrine offerings and then fix yourself some tea, etc. You practice this yoga of awakening for the entire time you do the ngöndro, and even after.

Session Preliminaries

Whenever you begin any session of practice, you settle down on a comfortable seat, expel the stale karmic prana, settle the mind into mindfulness, and invoke the guru's blessings. This is called the *session preliminaries* (*thun kyi sngon 'gro*). In the liturgy, it follows the yoga of waking up. In the Rigpa translation, this begins "You are the one whose kindness..." , while in the Nalanda this section begins with "Through your kindness..." You recite this, and the verses from the *Lama Yangtik* (*Very Essence of the Guru*). As with the yoga of waking up, you continue to use this practice prior to sessions throughout the entire time you are practicing the ngöndro, and preceding the sessions of any practice.

The Contemplations That Change the Mind

The session preliminaries are followed by what in the Rigpa translation is called the Actual Practice, and which has two parts - the ordinary (outer) preliminaries and the extraordinary (inner) preliminaries. It begins "O lama, care for me!" In the Nalanda translation, this first section of the outer preliminaries is called the General Preliminaries, and begins "O guru!". It is in the form of a Calling (Crying) to the Guru liturgy (*bla ma rgyang 'bod*). In some traditions, these opening lines are combined with the yoga of waking up.¹ Implicit within the lines of this liturgy, there are the foundational mind-changing reflections described in Part One of *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Chapter 1. *The difficulties of finding the freedoms and advantages*, Chapter 2. *The impermanence of life*, Chapter 3. *The defects of samsara*, Chapter 4. *Actions - the principle of cause and effect*, Chapter 5. *The benefits of liberation*, and Chapter 6. *How to follow a spiritual friend*. If you choose to practice the NDG for two hours/day, then you should contemplate each topic for 14 hours. You would do that with the aid of the *Words of My Perfect Teacher* - reading a small section of the relevant section, and then contemplating it. In addition to these six contemplations, we can add another 14 hours of shamatha-vipashyana meditation.

Begin each session with the session preliminaries, perhaps five minutes, and then chant the liturgy. Chant this once, and then contemplate the theme you are focussing on. To do this, it might

¹ In some traditions, you would chant "From the blooming lotus in the center of our heart..." first thing when we awake, and make that part of the yoga of awakening.

be helpful to read the liturgy again several times throughout the session, to keep the atmosphere of devotion fresh. In between, read from the *Words of My Perfect Teacher* or related writings, just reading sections briefly, and then sitting quietly and contemplate what you have read. In some cases, you could choose to do the reading outside of the practice time, and then just sit and contemplate during the actual session. This is fine, but as many of us get distracted, and so simply sitting and reading in small increments from the *Words of My Perfect Teacher* is probably a quite helpful way to keep the mind focussed. Reading the liturgy in between the contemplation invigorates the devotional aspect of calling the lineage gurus, and strengthens the experience of the contemplations.²

You should spend 14 hours on each of these six topics. In addition to these six contemplations, you should also spend 14 hours on meditation practice, accustoming ourselves to the practice of shamatha-vipashyana.

Do not underestimate the value of these contemplations - they are what shapes and informs our priorities in life. To spend time on these will impact your value systems, and you will come closer to the vision of our lineage masters.

² One of the most striking paragraphs in this liturgy is the description of the hot and cold hells, which some people might associate with ignorant beliefs rather than enlightened insight. Note that the objective here is to establish determination to relinquish the anger that causes hells. And, as we find in all the Buddhist teachings, the realms of samsara such as the hells are created by our minds; all our experiences of our person, our world, and our perceptions only exist as confused projections. Presently we have the freedom and opportunity to be free ourselves from the anger that causes these projections of the hell experiences. We invoke the presence and power of the guru and the lineage to be free from the causes of such immense suffering.

The Inner Special Preliminaries

The inner special preliminaries consist of five main practices, these are 1. Taking Refuge; 2. Developing Bodhicitta; 3. Vajrasattva Recitation and Meditation practice; 4. Mandala offering; and finally, 5. The Practice of Guru yoga.

All of these practices come from Rigzin Jigme Lingpa's principal student, the first Dodrupchen Rinpoche's original ngöndro root text, and there are various arrangements based on this root text from different lineage holders. We use Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's arrangement, and in there you will find some concise and very useful instructions in italics. The main scripture containing the teachings basic to the practices is Dza Paltrul Rinpoche's *Words of My Perfect Teacher*. In addition, there are further teaching on that text by Khenpo Ngawang Palzang entitled *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Both are available in English translation, and you would want to keep these with you as your companions as you do the practices. Moreover, on the SI website you have recordings of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche giving teaching which pertain to the various sections of the ngöndro.

1. Taking Refuge

Taking refuge involves first of all the recognition of the qualities of the refuge, which one may acquire through studying *Words of My Perfect Teacher*. The actual practice involves visualising the object of refuge, and combining the recitation of the refuge formula with the offering of prostrations - usually one repetition of the refuge formula per prostration. There will be an image of the refuge tree available on the website. This refuge tree is slightly different from some of the other traditions, in that Guru Rinpoche here is in a yogic form.

Given that we are doing it by time, we will do 360 hours on the practice of Refuge, which equals 6 months with two hours of practice daily.

2. Generating Bodhicitta

When one has completed the practice of taking of refuge, one proceeds to the practice of bodhicitta, where one would recite the bodhicitta formula in combination with generating the mind of awakening that aspires to establish all sentient beings at the level of buddhahood. Here too you consult with the *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, where there is an extensive chapter on Bodhicitta. Bodhicitta defines the vastness of the Mahayana path, and involves both a greater understanding of the view as well as more courage in the aspiration and application of the path.

You would spend three quarters of the time on the recitation, and the last quarter on the practice of tonglen. As with refuge, if you are doing two hours daily, you spend six months on the practice of generating bodhicitta (360 hours).

3. Vajrasattva Meditation and Recitation

The practice of Vajrasattva involves the purification of what obstructs our path to enlightenment – namely the four kinds of obscurations: cognitive obscurations, emotional obscurations, karmic obscurations, and the obscuration of habitual patterns. These are purified through meditation and recitation of Vajrasattva in combination with the Four Powers (*stobs bzhi*): 1) The power of support; 2) The power of regretting having done wrong; 3) The power of resolution; 4) The power of action as an antidote. The details for this practice is briefly described in the italics that you find in the translation of the actual Longchen Nyingtik ngöndro liturgy, and you also find this described in greater detail in *Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

Here you would spend 300 hours on the first part - the *outer purification* with the recitation of the 100 syllable mantra, and then 60 hours on the *inner purification* with the recitation of the six syllable mantra. Every session concludes with the dissolution of the visualisation and settling into formless meditation. You would want to spend 5 to 10 minutes in every session on the dissolution, and this constitutes the *secret purification*.

4. Mandala Offering

To practice accumulation of merit, we set up a simple mandala plate with five rice heaps on the shrine - what is called the *accomplishment* mandala - and that stays there for the duration of the practice. We ourselves use an *offering* mandala that we hold in our hands to offer saffron-dyed rice and various grains and precious objects. In the practice sessions, we initially recite once or thrice the classical 37-point mandala offering, and then for the remainder of the session we recite the three-kaya mandala-offering liturgy found in the Longchen Nyingtik ngöndro.

Since mandala practice is offered in order to accumulate merit, we set aside our desire for shortcuts and exert ourselves with the detailed preparation, which requires that we clean and offer saffron-dyed rice, which we generally replace every few days. The process of washing and dyeing the rice, we do not include in the hours, although it is in fact part of our accumulation practice, requiring generosity (the buying of the best rice); discipline (the regular perseverance) patience (cleaning the rice perfectly), exertion (being unstinting in our efforts), and then meditation and

prajna when we do the practice. We do this with a great deal of attention to cleanliness - as with any offering substance. In addition, we might also experience fatigue as we're doing the practice, such as when we're holding the mandala plate.

It's not rare for persons on their first time doing Mandala offering to become exasperated with this attention to cleanliness and detail, as well as the effort involved. Beginners of meditation might associate meditation practice with inactivity, and might not initially be open to the idea of meditation practice as involving physical effort, but we should remind ourselves that integrating our body and speech on the path is an essential part of the skilful means of the path.

For us to make a connection to the higher path of yogic conduct, we also make the uncommon mandala offering which does not involve any external objects, in which we make an offering of our body. This is the practice of Chod, or the Kusuli mandala offering, where we visualise offering that to which we are most attached to, namely our body.

We would want to practice the common mandala offering for five months (300 hours), and then for the last month (60 hours) we would practice the uncommon Kusuli mandala offering.

5. Guru Yoga

The guru yoga practice has several sections. In addition to the visualisation and the concluding practices of invoking the lineage and mingling with the wisdom of the guru, it has four components of accumulation: 1) the Seven Line Supplication; 2) the Seven Branch Prayer, 3) the supplication with great devotion, and 4) the practice of Vajra Guru Mantra.

The practice of guru yoga is the meeting of the student's mind with the teacher's wisdom, and this forms the basis for the swift path of Vajrayana which takes this wisdom as the path.

In the general Buddhist vehicles, the student purifies delusion through the path and gradually, over a very long period unveils buddha nature. This path, sometimes referred to as the Sutra or causal vehicle, takes the ordinary mind as its vehicle, and only gradually does the student recognise and realise the nature of the Dharmadhatu, the freedom from conceptual constructs (*spros bral, nisprapanca*). However, in the extraordinary path of Mantra, the student's devotion enables him or her to be deeply touched by the teacher's wisdom and compassion. This may be called *blessing*, and it brings an openness and insight beyond the scope of the ordinary rational

intellect. Such blessing arises as the result of devotion, and may lead to a recognition and experience of the teacher's wisdom. It is the foundation for reaching a deep insight that ordinarily would take lifetimes to acquire when practicing within the scope of the gradual path.

With devotion as the foundation of the guru yoga, the practice itself builds on the recognition of the pure nature of the guru's wisdom, and the blessing and empowerment that is invoked with the student's devotion. This enables him or her to gain insight into the actual nature of the guru as not merely an external person, but as the embodiment of all the buddhas' dharmakaya. Hence, the student visualises the guru as Padmasambhava, the unified embodiment of the Three Jewels and the Three Roots.

Visualisation

The students visualise themselves as Vajrayogini. At this point, the student has been processed through the previous ngöndro practices, humbly taking refuge from the miseries of samsara, generating the resolve to remain committed to the enlightenment of all sentient beings, purifying the veiling obscurations, and accumulating the immense merit required for the journey to enlightenment. The student has become a pure vessel for the further pursuit of the resultant vehicle of Secret Mantrayana, and, hence, visualize themselves as Padmasambhava's closest student and consort Yeshe Tsogyal - someone perfectly worthy of the guru's blessing and empowerment. This visualisation is particularly helpful considering their auspicious connection. The student also abandons ordinary deluded habitual perceptions in regard to the place, and sees it as a pure realm.

Sections of Practice

- **Seven Line Supplication** After setting up the visualisation, one proceeds to chant the Seven Line Supplication 100,000 times. There are teachings on the various meanings of the Seven Line Supplication. One has been translated by Padmakara. On the website we will also post a brief and extremely profound instruction from the treasure-revealer (tertön) of the Seven Line Supplication, Guru Choki Wangchuk. This we do for 120 hours.
- **Seven Branch Prayer** One then proceeds to do the sevenfold service, in combination with prostrations. This too we do for 120 hours.
- **Devotional Supplication** Then we chant the brief devotional supplication, also for 120 hours.

- **The Vajra Guru Mantra** As it is stressed in all the teachings and instructions, this all needs to be done with strong yearning devotion. We say practicing guru yoga with dry eyes will not achieve much. We practice this recitation for 300 hours.
- **Receiving Empowerment** We practice chanting the invocation of the lineage, and the visualisation of receiving the four empowerments for 60 hours.

At the conclusion of every session, we enter the completion stage where we mingle with the guru's wisdom, and settle into meditation. Depending on the length of time you are practicing, you would spend 10-20% of the session on the stages outside of the particular practice you are doing. So if you are doing the Seven Line Supplication, you would do that for 80-90% of the time, and the rest of the time on the sections prior and after what you are accumulating.

Three Supreme Methods

As always, it applies that in any session we practice within the framework and with the motivation of what in the *Words of My Perfect Teacher* is called the “three supreme methods” (*dam pa gsum*). We prepare every session with bodhicitta, recognising how all the suffering in the world comes from the delusion of grasping at a solid self, and recognising how our practice is a remedy for that. Our practice expresses our motivation and commitment to the wellbeing of all sentient beings, which is the first supreme methods, and is called the “preparation with bodhicitta” (*sbyor ba sems bskyed*).

We then undertake the practice without being distracted, or without any objective reference point. For advanced yogis, this would mean not moving from the realisation of emptiness, but Dza Paltrul Rinpoche advises that for ordinary practitioners, this means one should not be distracted. This is the second supreme method, and is called “the main practice free from reference points” (*dngos gzhi dmigs pa med pa*).

Dedication and Aspiration

Finally, we dedicate the merit, which is the third supreme method, called “concluding with dedication” (*rjes la bsngo ba*). Great Bodhisattvas would not be caught by the pride of doing something good, but ordinary persons do linger and grasp the threefold concept of someone, doing something, for someone else. So, to eliminate that threefold concept of subject, object, and action, we think that the virtue of the practice is dedicated to others, and that we keep nothing of it for ourselves. We ponder how all sentient beings, as they all have been our former mothers at

some point, are suffering, and we dedicate the merit of our practice to their swift enlightenment. Such dedication carries the aspiration to dedicate free from the three concepts of subject, object, and action.

After the dedication, we conclude the practice with prayers of aspiration. There are many profound aspirations in the end of the liturgy that we may chant.