

Summaries of Venerable Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche's NSS teachings

First weekend: Hinayana teachings

Tsultrim: the Ground for Our Spiritual Path (July 2)

In order to practice the Dharma, we need to be born in the human realm and have the four wheels: 1) an environment where there's Dharma; 2) a spiritual friend; 3) the inspiration to be a spiritual person; and 4) positive karma and habituation from past lives. Only a tiny fraction of the human race has all four. Even most Dharma practitioners show a lack of positive habituation because we still chase outer conditions and don't believe deeply that happiness is to be found in our mind.

For momentary happiness, we don't need to practice Dharma; even bees and birds seem to be happy on a nice day. But liberation—by which we mean liberation from being self-absorbed—is very different from happiness. Generally, we are too brainwashed by our deep mental fog and immersed in our chains of thoughts to even have the awareness that we're self-absorbed. But with self-reflection, we can see through our habits and aspire to replace them with better habits.

To plant the seeds of liberation, we need a field with good soil and fertilizer. This field is *tsultrim*, or moral discipline, which is the main focus of the Hinayana teachings. The Hinayana is like the first floor of a building. Without it, we can't build the second and third floors of the Mahayana and Vajrayana. There will be no way to attain liberation or even to have higher rebirths.

Although *tsultrim* applies to body, speech, and mind, we focus on the mind, which is the ruler of the other two doors. But we can't apply *tsultrim* to our mind if we're always making excuses based on our self and its attachments. Instead, we have to apply a universal perspective. As the Buddha said, "Take yourself as an example and do not harm others." Because we have direct experience of what makes us happy and unhappy, we can infer that the same things make others happy and unhappy. If we go against this principle mindlessly, we should acknowledge our wrongdoing instead of defending our ego.

Two qualities that are indispensable for practicing discipline are *ngotsa* (self-respect) and *trelyö* (decency). In all our actions, we have to consider what will preserve our self-respect. We aren't merely constrained by the law or because we're too weak to harm others but because of our internal sense of morality. This morality is based on equality and empathy. We understand that all sentient beings are just like ourselves in their wish to be happy and their longing to be free from suffering, and therefore we refrain from harming them and we protect them as much as possible. We should cultivate the view that life isn't a game to win; the point is to live intelligently and harmoniously.

An analogy that helps us understand *trelyö* is the attitude of good parents. They bear their responsibility joyfully and feel that their own happiness is closely linked to the happiness of their children. Thus they are always thinking of how to protect their children from harm and doing whatever they can to enhance their children's well-being. Having this attitude to those who are close to us is a good starting point for upholding the bodhisattva vow.

Impermanence, Death, and Not Doing What Is Pointless (July 3)

Our status as practitioners will be confirmed at the time of our death. To improve our chance at a good outcome, we need to lessen our preoccupations with meaningless things. Great masters like Milarepa were utterly determined to spend all their time bridging the gaps with their teachers. Like people with stage 4 cancer, they had no illusions that life would go on indefinitely. When we sit down on the cushion and contemplate impermanence and death, we may realize that we've been simply burdening ourselves by doing things that will add up to nothing when we die. This contemplation has the ability and blessing to release us from our attachments, which will make the lineage say, "Hurray!"

We want to be in control of our life, but that's impossible when our mind is controlled by our emotions, which in turn come from the ripening of karmic seeds. This is how we ruin ourselves in samsara over and over. Dharma isn't about always doing something; the profound aspect of the Dharma is realizing what's happening to us in the present moment.

Our practice won't amount to anything without a strong sense of impermanence and death. We will be constantly sidetracked by the eight worldly concerns and will ruin our straightforward path to enlightenment. The eight worldly concerns are all versions of our ego getting excited. We have to compare these ephemeral experiences to the invaluable richness of staying on course. This kind of discernment is the true Dharma. It's why the Buddha said, "You are your own greatest protector."

There are three categories of how we can meet our death. The best one is to feel relief about leaving samsara and approaching liberation. The next best is to die with confidence and no regrets. The worst is to be full of confusion and fear. To be in the first two categories, we need to work hard, which begins by contemplating impermanence and death. Patrul Rinpoche recommended that, whether we're old or young, we always think it's sunset time. When we hear news that confirms the inevitability and unpredictability of death, we should apply it to our own uncertain condition. In the beginning, contemplating impermanence will motivate us to practice; in the middle, it will increase our diligence; and in the end it will bring us to realize the dharmakaya.

The Buddha's Life and Legacy (with refuge vow ceremony) (July 4)

In his past lifetimes, the Buddha prayed to be born in a time of conflict. According to the Mahayana, he became enlightened long ago in Akanishtha and then benefited beings in the realm of Tushita. His descent to Earth from Tushita was the first of his twelve acts as Buddha Shakyamuni. His second act was to enter his mother's womb in the form of a white elephant. He took birth in the beautiful garden of Lumbini (third act). As a child, he learned many skills (fourth act) and was superior to everyone in whatever he did, whether it was learning languages or shooting arrows. He also showed great compassion, as demonstrated in the story of Devadatta and the swan. Then he married and lived happily for a while as a family person (fifth act).

When he ventured out of the palace grounds, he saw signs of old age, sickness, and death, and he asked his chariot driver if this was the fate of all beings. The driver said it was, so the Buddha left the palace in the middle of the night in search of a solution to this universal problem (sixth act). He learned all he could from three Samkhya teachers and spent years doing ascetic practices (seventh act). Finally, he realized his austerity was another extreme, so he accepted an offering of milk and kusha grass and vowed to stay under the Bodhi Tree until he attained enlightenment (eighth act). While he sat there, he had to overcome the maras, who tried and failed to seduce him and then shot arrows at him that turned into flowers (ninth act). After they gave up, he became enlightened at dawn (tenth act).

He stayed quiet for seven weeks, thinking that the state he had found would be too difficult for others to understand if he attempted to teach it. Then Brahma and Indra requested that he teach and he began to turn the Wheel of Dharma (eleventh act), starting with his sermon on the Four Noble Truths. By sharing what he found, the Buddha gave countless beings like ourselves a solution to the twelve nidanas, which lead to endless rounds of old age, sickness, and death. In his twelfth and final act, the Buddha passed away into mahaparinirvana.

No one is resilient enough to stand being in samsara without *dakme tokpe sherab*, the wisdom that realizes identitylessness. Even we who have the best of life in samsara can only manage by constantly forgetting about our past suffering. When we search for identity but don't find it, what we find instead is the palpable experience of jnana, vipashyana, the awakened state—from where we can see that samsara is merely a façade. Seeing samsara's nature is nirvana. By realizing identitylessness, birth, old age, sickness, and death will no longer have any bearing on us.

Only the Buddha has provided us with the knowledge that can end our suffering in samsara. But to find liberation for ourselves, we need to put in the hours on the cushion, as Milarepa and many others have done. This requires persistence, or *nyingru*, which literally means "a piece of bone in the heart." Thanks to the Buddha's teachings, if we're persistent, samsara's days are numbered for us. Then, if we do come back, we will do so by choice to benefit sentient beings.

This talk concluded with the refuge ceremony. In addition to taking refuge in the Buddha as the guide and the Dharma as the path, we take refuge in the Sangha, our companions on the path,

who are partially awakened. In the Sangha, we should especially hold the monastic community in the highest regard because they have preserved the Dharma until this day.

Second weekend: Mahayana teachings

Beyond Eternalism and Nihilism (July 9)

In the future, there will be two types of Dharma in the West—traditional Dharma and Western Dharma. Rinpoche says he only knows how to teach traditional Dharma, which is based on seeking liberation.

In the Hinayana, “liberation” means total peace, the state of *gokpa*. In the Mahayana, we can be liberated only when we realize emptiness and see that samsara in its essence is nirvana. This is one of the most important differences between the two yantras.

We need to be liberated from both eternalism and nihilism and rest in the Middle Way. Eternalism is based on a feeling of *tak dzin*, or permanence. It hasn't fully dawned on us that we can never know when, where, or how we'll die. Because this type of ignorance is behind all our attachments, especially to our body, it is a cause of great suffering. Eternalism also makes us put off practice until later. Nihilism brings us a lot of fear, especially around death, which seems like extinction. It fuels our fear of loss and the unknown.

Nagarjuna said eternalists can have higher rebirths because they have positive hopes and therefore do virtuous things. But nihilists go down because they don't believe their actions have consequences after death. Buddhist morality is based on seeing ourselves and others as equal. Whoever goes against this principle creates negative karma, regardless of what the human law allows.

To attain liberation, we have to go beyond good and bad actions and discover the state of Mahamudra, Maha Ati, or Madhyamaka, which are all names for the same realization of emptiness. Liberation isn't a static mental state we can hold onto. Ultimately, we have to meditate until we reach the point of no-meditation. One poignant line in the *Heart Sutra* gives us a sense of this liberation beyond all extremes: “Therefore, Shariputra, since the bodhisattvas have no attainment, they abide by means of prajnaparamita.”

Attaining liberation requires spending a lot of time practicing in solitude. We must also rely on the blessings of an authentic lineage. We will know when we're liberated, not through any external signs, but when we've realized egolessness of the self and phenomena, and when we have shed our emotional and cognitive obscurations.

With emptiness as our in-meditation practice and compassion as our post-meditation practice, we can go forward in all our remaining lifetimes with a sense of purpose and joy. As Situ Rinpoche said, if we only get 1% of the way to enlightenment in this lifetime, we will be fully enlightened in 100 lifetimes. And as the Buddha said, when we have absolute and relative

bodhicitta in our mind and heart, lifetimes go like days, and we won't suffer like others because emptiness transcends the suffering. If we stop distracting ourselves so much from practicing on the cushion, we can attain this liberation.

Compassion: the Most Important Sign of Realizing Emptiness (July 11)

It's possible to be deeply compassionate and not have the emptiness view, as with people like Mother Teresa, but emptiness without compassion is impossible. When we realize emptiness, we become free from ignorance and therefore all 12 nidanas. This freedom naturally gives rise to empathy. Even a gangster who would ruthlessly kill his enemies would save someone from drowning because he'd be coming from a place of freedom and ability to help. Realizing emptiness leads to a state of total freedom, which produces unconditional empathy a thousand times greater than in one who doesn't have this freedom.

In general and among MSB students, people have two basic dispositions. People with the shravaka disposition are very together, rational, and generally self-serving. People with the bodhisattva disposition feel deeply for others and extend a lot, often doubting themselves and getting confused. But someone with the bodhisattva disposition should realize that getting lost in love and care for others is not a weakness but a great strength. It is the disposition that led to the Buddha becoming the Buddha. But in order to reap the full benefits of this disposition, we have to overcome our attachments, especially to our spouse, our children, and our resources. If we remain in denial about these attachments, impermanence will eventually crush us down.

In the Mantrayana, the three main signs of growing realization are increased prajna, devotion, and compassion. Rinpoche said that for his students, the most important sign is compassion—how much we feel for others. And the more we gain realization, the more this becomes a deep joy, without any sense of burden. For Rinpoche, growing devotion—which in essence is gratitude—is the most important sign of progress. But although this is true for him, he feels it would be obscene to tell his students they didn't have realization because they don't have enough devotion toward him.

When we practice to realize emptiness, we don't solicit positive thoughts and reject negative ones. Rather, we let all thoughts be self-liberated, like letters written on water. If we've had our nature introduced, then meditation (*gom*) is the practice of not collapsing into the deep mental fog from where our neurosis gains momentum to assume its reality. The practice is to allow our mind to flow and see whatever arises as similar to a reflection in a clear pond.

Before leading the bodhisattva vow ceremony, Rinpoche talked about the four immeasurables, especially sympathetic joy, "the best way to be kind to yourself." By rejoicing in the good deeds and fortunes of others—particularly in the actions and accomplishments of the buddhas and bodhisattvas—we counteract jealousy, which is the coarsest and most pointless of the five afflictive emotions. From there, we can work with the other emotions in order of increasing subtlety: aggression, pride, attachment, and finally deep mental fog.

Third weekend: Vajrayana teachings

Dharma Is the World's Heritage (July 16)

All beings suffer from deep mental fog, which makes us believe in a real self. This ignorant belief brings about all the afflicting emotions, which have more destructive power than any other force in the world. We may not be suffering acutely now, but we are like a lobster in a pot where the heat has just been turned on. At any moment, our afflicting emotions and karma may flare up and cause us immense pain.

Because all beings are in this precarious situation, we all need to be liberated from samsara. The Dharma, which is the remedy for deep mental fog, fulfills a universal need. This makes it more than a religion that certain people follow. It is the heritage of all sentient beings. Many historical locations are considered “World Heritage Sites” but the Dharma is a far more significant heritage because it liberates us from all forms of suffering.

The Dharma is not something made up by the Buddha. It is his discovery of the truth. But provisional teachings may not be absolutely true because their purpose is to lead particular individuals to the truth contained in the definitive teachings. For example, when the Buddha told a grieving woman that he could revive her dead child if she could find one household in which death hadn't occurred, he was indirectly teaching her about the universality of death.

By waking up to the truth of Dharma, countless people in the past have become liberated. This can be the case for us today and for people in the future. But for the Dharma to continue, it needs to be passed down through an unbroken lineage. Without this, we would need to rely on people's creativity rather than their realization.

In the Vajrayana, all lineages begin with Vajradhara, who is the Buddha in sambhogakaya form. The tantras he taught were gathered by Vajrapani, who passed them on to Garab Dorje. From him, the lineage has been passed down through human teachers all the way to the Venerable Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche.

For the lineage to be transmitted, the student needs to come from a place of humility, earnestness, and longing—not like an entitled club member. Humility serves us in all areas of life but most significantly in the Dharma. We may be “humble” in the presence of our spouses or patrons because we fear them, but that kind of humility simply amounts to giving someone else our nose rope.

In this degenerate age, it's hard to find good gurus and even harder to find good disciples, but when the two come together, liberation can be found. But the question is, how much do we care about liberation? If we do care, the time to act is now, when we have this extremely rare and precious human birth. If we set our sights on becoming free from deep mental fog, the Vajrayana will benefit us tremendously; if not, it will be more like a game.

Key Points of the Three Yanas (July 18)

Before speaking about the Vajrayana, Rinpoche went into more detail about some themes from his Hinayana and Mahayana talks that apply to all three yanas.

Contemplating impermanence and death is the entry for all who aspire to be liberated from samsara. The result of this contemplation should be renunciation—not only to pain and the suffering of the lower realms, but also to our hankering for pleasurable states.

Renunciation is a deep cleansing that brings peace and freedom from all that preoccupies us. For this, failure is often a greater blessing than success. Failure is the nature of how things are in samsara. The self is insatiable; our attempts to satisfy it are like going down a rabbit hole. The self, by design, is flawed by deep mental fog. Understanding this will bring about the renunciation necessary to practice all three yanas.

Next, Rinpoche expanded on his Mahayana teachings. There are two kinds of bliss: the ordinary kind the self hankers after, and the extraordinary bliss of bodhicitta. Sentient beings almost always go for the first type, which inevitably leads to suffering. Because of deep mental fog, intention and action don't meet. But even when we see it doesn't work, our habit of acting based on *dak che dzin*, or self-importance, isn't easy to overcome. The only way out is through turning toward *zhen che dzin*, holding others as important, which is the essence of bodhicitta. This leads to the second kind of bliss: bliss beyond self.

First, we must see how ourselves and others are unconditionally equal. We're all suffering in samsara, all unable to meet intention with action. This naturally remedies our *dak che dzin* and makes it possible to practice loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. The main impediment to bodhicitta is that we live in a world that cherishes self-importance; even spiritual friends and companions may have a bad influence on us in this way. Therefore, what we should cherish most in teachers and fellow students is their bodhicitta.

In the Vajrayana, we practice *mögu* (devotion) in order to receive the guru's blessings, which will help us recognize the enlightened nature of our mind. To discover our own enlightened nature, we have to see the guru as enlightened, for how else would he or she be able to guide us there? The most reliable way to develop the necessary trust is by observing the guru's deeds over a long period of time. With *mögu*, realization will gradually dawn and we will eventually accomplish the eight signs of maturity, as sung by Milarepa. If we can accomplish these in this lifetime, we will attain enlightenment at the time of death by merging the child luminosity with the mother luminosity; if not, we can make aspirations for our next life.