

Mirror of Freedom
Number 8

Practice Questions: Part One
Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche

May all beings find liberations in the vast expanse of the mirror of freedom.

These questions were asked of Chagdud Rinpoche by sangha members of Ghagdud Gonpa Odsal Ling in the fall of 1992. Rinpoche's responses were translated by Richard Barron.

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Ghagdud Gonpa Foundation
P.O.Box 279
Junction City, CA 96048-0279

(916)623-2714

MAY ALL BEINGS BENEFIT!

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MIRROR OF FREEDOM

Question: You have taught, time and time again, that the difference between practitioners and nonpractitioners is that nonpractitioners perceive the phenomenal world as if looking through a window, whereas practitioners do so as if looking in a mirror. Could you say more about this, since it is so important for our practice ?

Response: If we want to help others eliminate flaws and develop positive qualities, we have to ensure first that we ourselves are free of flaws and endowed with positive qualities. Even if we are not completely flawless, even if we have not fully revealed all of our positive qualities, we should at least have purified our mindstream enough to help others rather than simply criticize them.

That is why it is important to examine our own minds. When we have a negative thought, or even a neutral one - one that isn't particularly non-virtuous - we must try to transform it into a virtuous one. The more we redirect the mind, the more its outer expression in speech and actions becomes virtuous. The root of all phenomena in samsara and nirvana is the mind. Virtuous and nonvirtuous states of mind are responsible for the karma that leads to suffering or happiness.

If we repeatedly examine our thoughts, words and actions, and tame our own minds, our shortcomings will begin to diminish and our positive qualities grow. The more our flaws are reduced, the more those around us will benefit. The more our positive qualities are enhanced, the more we will be capable of helping others cultivate those qualities themselves.

Question: Of the Three Jewels - the Buddha, dharma and sangha - the qualities of the precious sangha are sometimes the most difficult to see. It is often hard to maintain pure view about our peers. How does establishing a good relationship with fellow practitioners benefit our

practice? How can we give rise to pure view and appreciate the positive qualities of sangha members?

Response: If we consider the infinite number of beings in the six realms of samsara proportionately, we could say that the number of beings in the hell realms is like the number of dust particles in a huge country. The number of pretas, or hungry ghosts, is equivalent to the grains of sand in the river Ganges and the number of animals, to the number of grains in a large bowl of swollen mash used to ferment beer. The demigods are equal in number to the snowflakes in a blizzard or raindrops in a storm. The number of gods and humans is like the number of grains of sand that could fit on your fingernail.

So, to begin with, human existence is very rare, for human beings are far less numerous than other beings. Further, although many countries are populated by hundreds of millions of human beings, how many of those people are actively pursuing a path of virtue and benefit for others through their thoughts, words and actions? How many are trying to avoid harming others and acting in nonvirtuous ways? The number of such people can be likened to the number of stars one can see in the daytime - very few indeed.

The Tibetan word for the Sanskrit sangha is gedun, which means someone who yearns for, or is motivated by, virtue. If people have that quality of seeking virtue, even though they may not be flawless, their motivation and personal commitment make them very special. Members of the Mahayana sangha vow not only to free themselves from cyclic existence, but to free others as well. How could we not see that commitment as the best of all qualities? We mustn't ignore it and focus instead on more temporary and personal shortcomings. Those with whom we associate in the sangha are our companions until we attain enlightenment. By viewing them with respect and appreciation, we are benefiting ourselves because this increases our merit. It purifies our negative habits and the effects of negative karma. So there is a direct relationship between our attitude of respect for the sangha and the benefit that we as individual practitioners gain.

Question: Perhaps our biggest obstacle on the path is the fact that we're fickle, that our diligence in practice vacillates. Would you please speak about how a beginning practitioner can develop his or her enthusiasm in order to practice steadily?

Response: In order to develop diligence, we need to think again and again about the precious opportunity that human existence provides - to recall the freedom and opportunity that we have to pursue spiritual development and to remind ourselves that spiritual practice is the only way to discover the essence of being human. We should further understand that we must use this precious opportunity well, for we have no idea when we will die. We only know that we will die. Once we have died, the only thing that will make any difference is our positive and negative karma. Positive karma will lead to temporary and ultimate happiness, and negative karma to further suffering. This understanding should be based on a firm belief in the infallibility of karma, not just on an abstract notion.

If our mind follows our negative karmic patterns, we will be propelled into states of rebirth where there is only suffering - whether the intense heat and cold of the hells; the relentless hunger and thirst of the hungry ghost realms; the suffering due to stupidity and the struggle for survival among animals; birth, old age, sickness, death and other sufferings of the human condition; the suffering due to quarreling, jealousy and strife in the demigod realms; or the suffering due to the fall from the god realms.

Understanding these four thoughts - precious human birth, impermanence, karma and suffering - contemplating them, calling them repeatedly to mind and, finally, meditating on them is the most excellent way to develop unswerving diligence.

Question: Sometimes emotions like anger, desire or romantic love arise so strongly in the mind they seem to have their own power and we can become obsessed with them. As much as we might try to change these habit patterns, no matter how much energy or effort we expend, we often can't overcome them. Where does this power of the emotions come from? What antidote, technique or method can we use to deal with them?

Response: Whether we are experiencing attachment or aversion, the object of our emotion, the person or thing toward which we feel anger or desire, is not permanent, or singular, or autonomous. Quite the opposite. All of the objects of our emotions are impermanent, composed of many different parts and subject to external influences, with no self-power or autonomy. Once we understand this, we need to contemplate it again and again. It's not enough to recognize this to be true and then forget about it. We must think about it repeatedly so that we gradually come to the realization that the objects of our attachment and aversion do not really exist, but are like images in a dream. This is the primary antidote to strong emotions.

Another approach involves using an emotion like anger to antidote itself: the mode of anger is employed skillfully to tame the ordinary, confused aspect of anger. For example, in certain wrathful Vajrayana practices, we may utilize the imagery of the slaying of enemies. However, this involves no externalized aggression, for we recognize that the enemy we experience as outside of us is not what is preventing us from achieving liberation: the real obstacle is our anger toward the enemy. So we focus not on defeating an external enemy, but on liberating the internal enemy, the true enemy: our own hatred and anger, which, if acted upon, cause us to create negative karma. In these practices, we liberate this inner enemy in the context of the four immeasurable qualities of love, compassion, joy and equanimity and from the perspective of wisdom, the realization that neither the self nor phenomena have true self-nature.

We can use a similar approach with desire. For example, sexual attraction involves the object of one's desire, oneself as the one who desires and the sexual activity or interactions between oneself and the object of our attraction. In Vajrayana these are referred to as the "three spheres" of subject, object and the activity between them. From the point of view of its essential nature, neither the object of desire, oneself as the desiring subject nor any activity based on that desire could ever be established to have its own true existence. Each is empty of self-nature. Yet the inherent dynamic energy of emptiness manifests unceasingly. This is the display of pristine awareness as phenomena.

So we can engage in activity based on desire from a higher perspective. If we understand it from the point of view of its essential nature rather than in terms of what takes place when we feel it and act on it, we can experience the ordinary pleasure of sexual activity nondually as the union of bliss and emptiness. In this way, we use the mode of desire skillfully to tame ordinary, confused desire. Without this view of its essential nature, however, our activity will be based on ordinary desire and we will accumulate karma.

Even though we may embark on this path and rely on such meditation, we won't immediately transform our perceptions, for we are dealing with very strong habitual patterns. But with consistent, stable practice, our negativities will gradually diminish and all that is positive, virtuous and supportive of enlightenment will grow. Regardless of the particular means we use, the important thing is to apply them over and over again, without becoming discouraged, remembering that the process takes time.

Question: There is a child in the sangha whose kitten broke its leg. The child prayed to Tara for help. At first, the kitten improved, but eventually died. Very disappointed, the child decided there is no benefit to doing Tara practice. In another case, a healthy young woman who

practiced Vajrasattva meditation for one year felt protected by the blessings of that deity. Then she got cancer and developed wrong views about the dharma. She felt that her practice had been a waste of time. How realistic is it to place hope on immediate benefit from our practice?

Response: To explain it in a way that the child could understand, we might use the example of an excellent car mechanic. If you have a car that isn't running well, how realistic is it to expect a very skilled mechanic to fix it? In the majority of cases, one could expect the mechanic to fix the car. But no matter how skilled the mechanic, if the car is worn out, it cannot be fixed.

What happens to a living being, whether a human or a kitten, depends on karma, as well as the incidental and immediate circumstances of life. If we have the karma to sustain this particular body, we will live. But if the power to sustain our existence dissipates, there is no way anyone can bring it back. Although the child's prayers didn't seem to have an immediate effect, this doesn't mean that the practice done on behalf of the kitten was wrong or useless; it will benefit that being in a future lifetime.

People can sometimes overcome enormous obstacles through their practice, even in this lifetime, when three factors come together: faith, karma that allows for the obstacles to be overcome, and the blessings and compassion of one's object of prayer.

Question: What is the origin of mantras? What is their function? Is it just that by using them our mind becomes stable or one-pointed, or are there other benefits?

Response: The power and effectiveness of mantra are due, first, to the fact that the sounds and forms of the mantra syllables are in essence not beyond emptiness or dharmakaya, and are therefore established by the true nature of reality itself. Second, the particular form that mantras take - the combination of certain syllables and their sound - is self-arising from the innate compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas. This is the establishment of their inherent power on the phenomenal level. Third, mantras have been used by great practitioners who have proved their value, consecrated them and imbued them with their own prayers and aspirations. This is called establishment through blessing. Finally, if people with faith in their effectiveness recite mantras repeatedly, they will purify their obscurations and karma and gain both ordinary and sublime siddhis, or spiritual accomplishments. This is called establishment through the power and energy of mantra. In our practice, both the mantras we use and the deities associated with them are endowed with these four kinds of establishment.

Question: Many people, and in fact many practitioners, doubt whether wisdom deities exist. Some believe that the deity is a higher form of sentient being who can guide us on the path or protect us. Others say the deity is a symbol or an expression of the true nature of our own mind. Ultimately, what is the nature of what we call "deity"?

Response: The term "deity" refers to both dharmakaya and rupakayas, or form manifestations. When we say the "dharmakaya of buddha," we are referring to a flawless state endowed with all positive qualities in which the fundamental nature of all phenomena is completely evident, free of all conceptual elaboration. The radiance of dharmakaya manifests unceasingly as the rupakayas: as the sambhogakaya in the perception of those with purified karma, and as the nirmanakaya to those with ordinary, unpurified karma.

At present, because we are temporarily, superficially subject to confusion, we experience reality in a dualistic way, with hope and fear, as self and other, high and low. Although superficial stains and distortions in our mindstream have not been purified, our essential

nature is pure. The difference between the deity and ourselves is that the deity embodies a twofold purity - that of mind's essential nature and that due to the purification of obscurations - whereas we are essentially pure, but not yet pure on the temporary, superficial level. Because of that, we perceive the deity as separate from us. Once the habit of perceiving things as distinct from us has been purified and our obscurations thus removed, we will recognize that there is no deity other than the self-manifesting appearances of the deity and pureland, beyond concepts of separate or identical.

Question: Do Western students have obstacles to their dharma practice that people in other countries don't have? Many Western practitioners maintain an outer dharmic conduct, and may be familiar with the names of many deities or hold sectarian views about different teaching lineages, but it would be difficult to say that we are true practitioners, that we have revealed love, compassion and wisdom from deep within the mindstream. Also, do people in the West enjoy specific advantages that will aid their practice?

Response: Many Westerners are intelligent, able to assess what different traditions have to offer and to make good decisions concerning what is important based upon that intelligent examination. But Western dharma students have a lack of information, simply because the Buddhist teachings have not been available for very long in the West. Also, as new dharma students, Westerners are sometimes not able to discern whether teachings are being presented in a biased or prejudiced manner. This doesn't happen often - most lamas teach in a nonsectarian and good-hearted way - but when it does and students are too inexperienced to recognize the distortion of genuine dharma, it can be a serious obstacle. Other than that, I don't see any particular problem unique to them. Western practitioners find it easy to change outer deportment, habits and so forth, but also realize that the inner transformation through practice is more important.

In a greater sense, we are all dealing with habitual patterns and negative karma that have been reinforced through time without beginning. Most Westerners must deal further with the fact that during the first part of their lives, they had no exposure to the teachings of dharma, and therefore had no opportunity to become familiar with practice, much less to spend the amount of time in practice that is necessary for inner transformation. They're starting fresh.

It's naive to assume that new practitioners will immediately eliminate all their shortcomings and develop all the positive qualities of practice. But if, having entered the door of dharma at whatever stage of life, they continue to practice then love, compassion and wisdom will grow. If people practice, they can improve. There is no difference here between Easterners and Westerners. If, when we first encounter the dharma, we think we are going to be perfect from the very beginning and that if that doesn't happen there is no point in practicing, we will be turning away from the only means we have to become perfect, to become true practitioners. First we must be exposed to the teachings and then we must practice so that over time, step by step, we will become true embodiments of the dharma.

Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, a highly-realized meditation master, artist and Tibetan physician, was born in Eastern Tibet in 1930. Recognized at an early age as an incarnation of the Abbot of Chagdud Gonpa monastery, he was thoroughly trained by many of Tibet's greatest lamas in the philosophy and meditation practices of Vajrayana Buddhism. He fled Tibet at the time of the Chinese occupation in 1959 and, at the request of H. H. Dudjom Rinpoche, helped establish and administer several refugee camps in both India and Nepal.

At the request of several American students, he came to the U. S. in 1979. Since then, through the Chagdud Gonpa Foundation, he has established centers for the study and practice of Vajrayana Buddhism throughout the United States, Canada, Europe and Brazil.

Chagdud Tulku's primary residence is in Junction City, in the Trinity Alps region of Northern California.