

~ Introduction to Nectar of the Path ~

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I've been asked to say a few words about Mingyur Rinpoche's practice, *The Nectar of the Path – A Reminder for Daily Practice*. I'm delighted to have a chance to talk about this because I remember well in the summer of 2010, during the summer retreat at St. John's University, Mingyur Rinpoche called the four Tergar instructors into his bedroom and showed us the handwritten manuscript that he had written that was this practice. This is a beautiful practice. It's a complete practice, and one that encompasses all the aspects of the path that we can incorporate in one session, in one sitting, in our daily practice.

I'm going to talk about this practice somewhat from my own experience from having done it, somewhat relying on Mingyur Rinpoche's teachings that he gave us in the months after, and some of these will just be general comments. For those of you who would really like to go further and hear exactly what Mingyur Rinpoche has to say about this practice, I encourage you a lot and you can find these teachings, recordings of these teachings in a CD set called, *The Essential Dharma*, that's available on the Tergar store.

In this practice we're going to mix both contemplation and meditation together. There are parts that we contemplate and then there are times when we meditate. So in general, you could say that this practice is broken up into three general stages. The first is based on the principles of orienting one's mind towards the path through the common preliminary practice of The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind. This is the beginning of the practice, and we'll talk about that in just a second. Then, the practice brings us to enter the path fully through the taking of refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, the Three Jewels. And finally, this practice encompasses the aspect of recognizing our own enlightened nature through connecting and mingling our minds with the guru and the wisdom lineage altogether.

So in general, this practice is based on taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, the Three Jewels. For those of you who are new to this, or for those of you who have come up through the Joy of Living gateway, some of this might be new. We thought it would be good if we had an introductory discussion of this practice so that new people and those of you for whom the paradigm of taking refuge, relating with a guru, relating with a lineage, relating with this kind of practice at all—for those of you for whom this is new, this would be a chance to understand a little bit and to think whether this is the kind of practice you want to take on or not.

In the beginning Rinpoche starts with the contemplation of the four thoughts. The first thought says, “Seeing its many wonderful qualities, I rejoice and delight in this human life.” This is the first thought that turns the mind to Dharma or turns the mind to the path, sometimes called the first of the four mind-changings. This, of course, is referring to the preciousness of this human birth. And rather than give you a lot of commentary on any of these points, I’m just going to highlight a couple of very short points. So this first thought that we contemplate is the contemplation of how rare and excellent this human life is, and the point is to develop confidence and the resolve to make this life meaningful by following the path.

The second of the contemplations, the second of the mind-changings, says, “Like waves in the ocean, all things are impermanent. I will accept whatever happens and make it my friend.” So of course this is about the contemplation of impermanence and the fact that this life and this situation is fleeting, so that I need to practice the path with exertion. And this idea of accepting whatever happens and making it my friend—in many ways this is one of the signature approaches that Mingyur Rinpoche takes altogether. That whatever arises whatsoever, that we can take it and use it as a support for meditative awareness. Whether it be thoughts, emotions, anything that arises in the phenomenal world, all of that can be used as a support to enhance our awareness. This is really the cornerstone of Mingyur Rinpoche’s approach.

The third is the contemplation on cause and effect. It says, “When causes and conditions come together, a result is sure to follow, so I will do my best to help others and engage in positive

deeds.” This of course is a discussion of karma. And the point here is to work with what we do, to be conscientious about what we do with our body, speech, and mind. “To help others and engage in positive deeds.” This is the essence of creating positive karma.

Lastly, it says, “The suffering of beings is mainly produced by the mind. I must free myself from my self-created bonds.” This is a contemplation of samsara, and the point here is that we need to make a determination that we’ll go beyond our self-created bonds until we realize the truth of timeless awareness.

Now we enter the unique preliminary practices. They’re unique because they’re unique to the Mahayana and Vajrayana. They’re not common to the other vehicles. We begin by invoking the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, where it says, “Three Jewels, undeceiving and everlasting sources of refuge, please be the guide, the path and companions for myself and all beings.” In short, the Buddha means the one who has purified obscurations and has brought to fullness the qualities of non-conceptual loving-kindness and compassion, as well as spontaneous enlightened activity. This is the nature of Buddha. The Buddha’s love and compassion are beyond duality. And the Buddha’s enlightened activity can be likened to the sun that shines everywhere with impartial warmth. But, as Mingyur Rinpoche points out, the Buddha can’t directly change our situation. The Buddha can’t take us and place us in enlightenment. But by taking refuge in the Buddha, we actually change our karma and begin to move in that direction, in the orientation of wakefulness and enlightenment. What can help us directly is the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. And, finally, the lineage of the teachings, the way the teachings are passed down to us, the way they’re made available to us is within the context of Sangha. So here we talk about the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

We do this through reciting the refuge formula. We can do it with a melody, or we can do it with a melody for a while and then, if we want to go longer, we can drop the melody. Very simply, where it says “Refuge and Bodhichitta” — “then recite the following three lines as many times as you are able,” it could go something like [sings melody]: Namo Buddhaya, Namo Dharmaya, Namo Sanghaya [repeats several times]. You would do this three times or, as it says, as many times as you are able. So this is the taking of refuge.

Then the next lines say, “The ultimate refuge is perfectly complete within me, for my mind is buddha nature, enlightened from the very start.” Here Mingyur Rinpoche is talking about the ultimate refuge, which is our own buddha nature. This is an incredibly important point. The whole point of this practice, the whole point of the teachings and, you could say, the sole intent of the Buddha, is to help us to recognize, to rediscover our own innate awakened nature. All of the methods of the path, the path itself, all the teachings, all the teachers are simply to point us back towards what we already have. This is the basis of the presentation of the Joy of Living level 1, where Mingyur Rinpoche says, over and over again, we are good already, we don’t need to change ourselves, but what we need to do is recognize what’s already here. This is the key view, the key point. This is the ultimate refuge, you could say, which is our own innate wakefulness, our own innate enlightenment.

Then the text goes on, where it says, “Next meditate on loving kindness and compassion.” And we recite, “I feel compassion for all the beings who, like me, want to be happy and free from suffering.” This is the key point or the key view of the Mahayana, which is this understanding that all beings are just like us. All beings are like our family in that we share the same feelings, the same desires, the same goals, the same hopes, the same fears. In essence, we all want to be happy and we all want to not suffer. This we take some time to contemplate on the cushion—the nature of this as being true. This is a contemplation that we could carry with us throughout the day, when we meet people, when we interact with the world. This key contemplation, which is: we’re all the same. We all want to be happy. We all want to be free of distress. This is Mingyur Rinpoche’s key presentation of the Mahayana.

Then it says, “Generate bodhichitta, thinking to yourself, ‘I will practice on the path to bring all the infinite number of beings to the state of buddhahood.’” “To bring all beings to the state of omniscient buddhahood, I will now practice the path.” So bodhichitta here is very critical, it’s a very important point. Bodhichitta has two main points, two points of focus. The first is that we want to work in any way we can to help all beings be happy and free of distress. We do this in all sorts of ways. Sometimes this is discussed in terms of our attitude or our intent, which is four boundless attitudes that we learn in level 2—boundless love, boundless compassion, boundless joy, and boundless equanimity. Those are our intent, the bodhichitta of intent, you

could say. And then the actual activity of bodhichitta is the practice of the six paramitas, which we could learn at some point—generosity, right conduct, patience, exertion, meditation, and wisdom.

So the first aspect of bodhichitta is to help beings and ourselves, and the second is the desire or the understanding that the only real help, the only ultimate help, the only thing that really will bring us all completely to peace and happiness is to achieve enlightenment. So the second aspect of bodhichitta is this resolve to go all the way, to bring all beings to enlightenment. And of course in order to do that, we ourselves have to go all the way. Only in doing so will we have the understanding, the wisdom, the ability, the extraordinary quality of heart to continue to work for all beings.

Mingyur Rinpoche's other comment about this is so beautiful and so important. We've all seen him act this out, this idea that everything that we do is to achieve happiness. And those of you who have taken the Joy of Living levels have seen him squirm in his chair and say that every time we move, every time we shift our body, every time we blink, every time we open the refrigerator door, is because we want to find some happiness or we want to be relieved of some kind of stress or distress.

This is the main thing to understand about oneself and others. Mingyur Rinpoche goes on further to say that actually this is the very sign of our buddha nature. This is the sign that, until we're established again back into our innate nature, that we will always feel some kind of distress, unease. More than that, it's almost like inherently, innately we know that we're off the mark. So the three qualities of this nature are always resonating with us, even though we don't know it. Wanting to be happy is our innate loving-kindness towards ourselves. Wanting to not suffer and experiencing the suffering is our innate compassion, which here means to want to relieve oneself and others from suffering. And knowing that we're off the mark, knowing that we are suffering, knowing instinctively that we haven't experienced the kind of peace that is there for us is our inherent wisdom.

So love, compassion, and wisdom are experienced by us all the time. In fact, Mingyur Rinpoche's father used to talk about the idea of all of us being homesick, homesick for this basic nature. This kind of dis-ease is because we want to go home again to this place of ease. Mingyur Rinpoche uses a famous and beautiful example of a bird and the nest. He says that birds fly far from their nests every day, and yet at night they fly back, they always know how to come back. But we're like birds that have flown from the nest, but have lost our way back. So we're homesick. The sense of dis-ease that we feel is the desire to return home. This contemplation and these images are to awaken this sensibility about ourselves and the nature of other people. To understand that we all have these qualities of innate love, compassion, and wisdom, but because we're not recognizing them directly, because we're not established in our fundamental wakefulness, our fundamental goodness, our enlightenment, our buddha nature, we all similarly struggle, in some way or another. So the resolve or the desire of bodhichitta is that we free ourselves and all beings from suffering, and that we all achieve the peace of enlightenment.

Now Mingyur Rinpoche goes further into guru yoga, where it says, "In the space before you, imagine your own guru in the form of Vajradhara or whichever buddha inspires you." "Think of me, O Guru. In essence, you are equal to all the buddhas, but in the kindness you have shown me, you are even greater." Now we move into this bridge into the Vajrayana that is guru yoga. In the Vajrayana we use three methods. There's the method of imagining oneself as an enlightened being, this is called the development stage. There's a method, in the Vajrayana, of working with the enlightened speech, which is working with the subtle energies of the body, the subtle body. And the third is the nature of mind. The nature of mind and pointing out this nature of mind is the essence of the Mahamudra.

Here we're talking more about this essential awareness, this essential mind. The way that we recognize that is through the aid or the method of guru yoga. When we talk about experiencing this awakened quality, right now it seems a little distant to us, a little foreign to us. We can't recognize it directly. What we can do is we can project these qualities, these enlightened qualities, onto our teacher or our guru. And by associating with that guru, and by this practice, we can mingle our mind with the guru's awakened mind. So in this way the guru

is the bridge back to our own enlightenment, enlightened mind. This is where it says the guru is even kinder than the Buddha—because we never met the Buddha, but the guru is here to help us out.

It says that we begin by imagining our guru in the form of Vajradhara or whichever buddha inspires us. The point here is that unless we have a fairly refined perception, often it's not easy to think of our teacher in person as completely awakened and pure. So we visualize the teacher in the form of an awakened, enlightened buddha in a symbolic form. Relating to a guru in this way is not only very beautiful but it's also extremely effective. Mingyur Rinpoche uses a beautiful example. He says that if we're just dealing with a friend, someone that we like, and the friend could give us the greatest advice in the world, or the friend might turn to us one day and say, "You are fundamentally good, you are basically good. Actually, you're enlightened. From the very start, you're enlightened." And we might say, "Yeah, yeah, thank you very much." And then, the next day, our friend would say, "You're good, you're really enlightened." We'd say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay." The third day, our friend would say, "No, no, really you're good. You're already enlightened. You don't need to change." And we'd say, "Okay, enough already, enough already." But as Mingyur Rinpoche says, if our hero—he uses the word hero—or, in this case, if our guru turns to us and he says or she says, "You're fundamentally good. You're already awakened." Through the trust that we have in that person, the truth of that will go all the way into our mind stream, like planting a seed. So having this basic quality of trust, of faith in the guru is what allows us to open the door to our own wisdom nature. There's a tremendous amount to say about how to relate to a teacher, why this is so effective, the various stages of the development of this quality of trust—it's a beautiful conversation and there's lots to learn more about in the future.

In this part of the practice it says, "Then recite the following as many times as you are able," and it says, "Lama khyeno—Think of me, O Guru." This also, like the taking of refuge, can have a melody to it. And this melody is particularly beautiful and evocative. The melody is meant to give us the sense of calling, of yearning to experience the guru's mind. It could sound something like [sings melody]: Lama khyeno, Lama khyeno, Lama khyeno, Lama khyeno . . . and we can repeat that again and again and then, after a while, if we want to not sing it out

loud, we can just repeat it as a mantra—Lama khyeno, Lama khyeno, Lama khyeno, Lama khyeno. And all the time we're imagining that the guru is in front of us and we're invoking the qualities of the guru.

Then, at the end of the recitation, it says, "Imagine that the guru melts into light and dissolves into you, your minds merging indivisibly." "Ultimately, I am the same as the guru in essence, for the nature of the student is the same as that of all the buddhas." "Rest here." The visualization of the guru melts into light, that light melts into your heart, and then we rest. It says, "rest here." This means rest in awareness. Rest in that quality of guru mind, the guru's awareness. Again, as we said before, the key point of all the teachings, all the methods, is to bring us back to this point of recognizing our own awareness that is indivisible, or is exactly the same as the guru's awareness.

For those of us who have had teachings on open awareness, on shamatha without an object, which Mingyur Rinpoche calls open awareness as we've learned in the Joy of Living levels, then this is the time where we rest in that quality of open awareness. For those of us who have had teachings on the nature of mind, or what's called the pointing out of the nature of mind, then at this point you rest in nature of mind. This pointing out of the nature of mind is pointing out the essential nature of that open awareness and that is what you'll learn, if you haven't already, during the Path of Liberation series.

Then, the conclusion. It says, "To conclude, let the mind rest naturally in the state in which you, the guru, and the buddhas are indivisible in essence." So we repeat those lines. Here, again, now we're resting one more time, and resting in open awareness, resting in the essence of mind, the nature of mind. As Mingyur Rinpoche says in his teachings, here without doing anything, not meditating, not blocking, not fabricating, we rest simply in mind's own awareness. We leave mind as it is, as Mingyur Rinpoche says in the Joy of Living level 1. Here we just meditate for as long as we want, using the methods that we've already learned of non-distracted non-meditation.

And then, finally, when we want to we go on to the dedication section, where it says, “With the buddhas of the three times and ten directions, along with their offspring, as your witnesses, dedicate the virtue to the welfare of others.” There’s a lot to understand about dedication, but in short, when we offer the virtue or the quality that has been developed through the practice that we’ve just done, when we offer it to the welfare of all beings, then it says that that virtue is never lost. The way we lose virtue once we’ve accumulated it by meditation practice or doing something positive in our life, the way we could lose that virtue is by regretting having done it—for instance, having made an offering and then later regretting that we made the offering. Or doing something that’s counter to virtue, doing something that’s negative. Or showing off—bragging about it or using that virtuous activity as a way of showing off. These are the ways that we could lose that virtue of the practice, so this is why dedication is so important. It’s said that dedication of anything that we do, anything that’s positive, if we dedicate it right away to the benefit of all, then that virtue is never lost.

So this was a little bit about this practice. Again, because it encapsulates the entire path, all the stages and the main points of view of the entire path, there is a fantastic amount to say about it. Most importantly, we should take these key points and we can learn more from Mingyur Rinpoche, from what he has taught, both in terms of hearing, by hearing them from Mingyur Rinpoche or Tsoknyi Rinpoche or any teacher, reading, but also, most importantly, contemplate these points throughout the day and base our meditation practice or our session in the day, our mediation practice, on these points using this practice.

I hope this is helpful, I hope it was more helpful than boring, and thank you very much for the opportunity for me to talk about this. Thank you.