

~ *The Logic of Ngondro* ~

By Cortland Dahl

If you look at the logic of the ngondro practices, you will see that each of the ngondro practices - because it is a whole array of practices that are packaged together - each of the practices in the ngondro path has a different way of supporting nature of mind practice. I have mentioned a number of times now how the ngondro practices have a way of working at the level of habit and conditioning. They are essentially loosening up the hardened soil of our mind so that we are more receptive to these teachings. We are more receptive to seeing this fullness of being - our own true nature, the pure nature of our awareness.

If you take a practice like Vajrasattva, on the surface of it - at first glance - if you are not familiar with the different elements of the Vajrayana practice, it can seem a bit bewildering. If you do this practice where you visualizing Vajrasattva - who is the embodiment of purity, essentially, - you are imagining this being that to you embodies the innate purity of buddha nature. In a way, it is meeting us where we are on our path. We might have heard teachings about innate purity. We might have an intellectual understanding of the idea of the purity of awareness, or the purity of buddha nature. But realistically, most of us when we sit down to practice, we have a very deeply ingrained habit to be relating to our experience as series of problems that we are trying to fix. So even when we are learning to relax and let be, there is often a subtle twiddling of the knobs of experience. We can have a little less thought, a little more of this emotion, a little less of that emotion. We are not used to actually trusting the wisdom of our experience.

So Vajrasattva is an example of the logic of ngondro. It meets us where we are. It is essentially like saying, "OK. You have this habit of mind, this emotional habit of relating to your experience as though who you are and what you are is incomplete, or insufficient. There is a problem in you that needs to be fixed." That is what you think. So it is giving us this practice where we are imagining Vajrasattva, and we imagine this nectar flowing through the body as a way of letting go of all these things where we think we are stuck. We think we have these negative habits. We have these things we have done and said and thought. So we are letting go of that again and again and again. It is engaging us where we are, which is, again, where we think we have all these problems to fix. And we could not possibly be awake or enlightened until we get rid of all these problems. So it is giving us

something to work with. But at the same time, it is slowly — almost beneath the surface — opening us up to the idea that, actually, there is something in us that has been pure all along; that is never made any worse no matter what thought we think or what emotion we have or action we take. It has never been defiled or impure. So the practices, like all of the practices in Vajrayana tradition, ends with Vajrasattva not above ourselves or outside of us but where Vajrasattva dissolves into light, melts into us, and we realize that, actually, that innate purity that we were visualizing in the form of Vajrasattva, actually, is us - that our own mind, actually, is innately inherently pure.

So each of these ngondro practices in a different way has a way of meeting us on the path and engaging a particular habit of mind — the habit of seeing ourselves and the world as impure, incomplete, or insufficient. But then also the flip side of that is then opening us up to a particular aspect of our own nature; in this case the innate purity of our mind. And when practicing in any given session, we are moving back and forth between these two. Old habits reemerge; there we are impure, thinking of all these problems and all these things, and we are engaging that, and then letting go and letting be and then, again, opening up to the possibility that, actually, there is no problem, that we have been pure all along. We just have not known where to look or how to look.

Similarly, mandala practice is another beautiful example of this; we start from a place of thinking we do not have enough. We have internally some sense of lack. We can look around this world. We can drive down the street and see how many messages we are constantly getting that are telling us that we do not have enough, we are not enough, we need something, we need to be somewhere else, we need to be with someone else, we need to have different job or have a different set of experiences, then everything will be OK. We are constantly getting this messaging that reinforces the idea of not having enough and not being enough, a kind of poverty like a deep, almost fundamental, sense of being impoverished. So it is meeting us at that level where we are, and it is giving us something to do that begins to loosen up that habit. In the case of mandala, it is just giving and it is imagining the most expansive thing we could ever imagine. All the wonderful things that come to mind; instead of thinking that we need to take that in, we imagine sending that back out, we imagine offering it. And then we move to the inner mandala, our own positive attributes, our body, the things we cherish, the things we hold dear, the things we are afraid of losing, we imagine sharing that, we imagine offering that.

Again, it meets us where we are on the path. But then it opens us up into an experience - not even an understanding or theory, but as a felt embodied experience, where we start seeing slowly that we are giving, we are sharing, but through that we are not feeling

depleted or diminished. We are getting in touch with the part of ourselves that can never be depleted. And the more that we give, the more clearly that comes into view. So again, we have this practice that is working on the relative level with these habits of mind, these emotional habits, but then at a deeper level, it is opening us up into an aspect of our own true nature — in this case a sense of inner richness, a quality of our being that can never be diminished in any way. And through giving and sharing, it helps us to see that and actually feel that and experience it.

In a way, these practices are a way to listen deeply to our own experience. We are tuning in. We are almost tuning into different aspects of our experience; both the habits that get us stuck and then what is beneath those habits and what is infusing those habits that oftentimes is just out of our field of vision, we do not quite see it, even though we might sense it or intuit that there is something more possible here.

That is the general logic of the ngondro practice, working both on the more relative level with habit but then, in a very powerful way, when we do a practice like Vajrasattva, or guru yoga or the four thoughts, we work with that level of habit, and then when we let go and we just rest and do these nature of mind practices, there is a clarity, a confidence, and a sense of receptivity that is not as available to us prior to doing those practices.

It can seem when you do ngondro - for me, it oftentimes seems like the practices brings more up, my mind seems busier, or emotions that I did not even know I have start emerging - it can feel at times even like you are going backwards in practice. But actually, what is going on is that ngondro is really doing its work, and it is getting at this hardened layer that, oftentimes - when we are just resting in shamatha for example - is there, but we have a way of almost smoothing it over. The surface is so harden that we can almost feel like, "OK..." Even though there is a sort of rigidity and stuckness beneath it, the veneer seems very polished and smooth.

So ngondro is messy. It has a way of breaking things up and getting the whole system moving. At times it is disruptive. At times it really feels tumultuous. But there is something very rich and beautiful happening within that. A lot of it is learning to trust and listen and simply open up into that flow of experience.