

Advice to Retreatants

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Any Sangha member who has the opportunity to practice in retreat is very fortunate. Many types of retreats exist in this world, but in the context of the Dharma, the term “retreat” is very meaningful. A human birth endowed with the freedoms and fortunes is extremely precious, and if you were to use this human body only for this life, distracted by this life’s concerns, this precious human life would become meaningless. You would leave this world empty-handed, without having accomplished anything. Then, following your karma and karmic winds, you would just go on experiencing various kinds of happiness and suffering.

Tsam is the Tibetan word for “retreat,” which is part of another word meaning to “stop,” or to “bring to an end.” So when you go on retreat, you are bringing to an end all of your regular daily activities in order to reflect upon this and future lives. That is the important opportunity you gain when you do a retreat. Moreover, within the context of the practice of the holy Dharma, retreat means that we stop all of our self-cherishing attitudes and instead develop a mind of altruism, which is really the essence of the holy Dharma. Whatever practice you are doing, whether it is visualizing a deity or reciting a mantra, it must have the altruistic mind as its basis.

Milarepa provides us with an example of someone who really stopped all worldly activities and gave up all worldly concerns. Although we can’t do it exactly the same way as him, as we do have to engage in some mundane activities in this world nowadays, at the very least we should make sure that through our practice we take birth in the higher realms as a precious human being. And we should then take that opportunity to increase our bodhicitta further and further, for it is when bodhicitta begins to arise that the mind attains some freedom. This freedom also comes from knowing that the afflictive emotions arise from self-clinging, and that the arising of the afflictive emotions leads to specific results.

Life is impermanent. One day you will die, and due to karma, you will follow your own karmic winds. At that time you will have no control

over what happens. What we call the karmic winds *are* our afflictive emotions, and we habituate ourselves to contemplating this when we do a retreat. Through contemplating in this way, self-clinging is transformed into altruism, and then altruism becomes purified into the natural state. At that point you will realize the pure natural state of the minds of all sentient beings.

In a retreat, you gain the experience of the mind calming down and coming to rest. As a result, if you have some wisdom, the retreat will be experienced as something blissful, something very pleasant. For those without wisdom, however, a retreat can often feel tiring and exhausting. That is because their self-clinging is too strong, and they are too strongly attached to this life and this world. To them, a retreat is more like a hellish experience.

When we are doing a retreat—even for just a short time—we familiarize and habituate ourselves again and again to bodhicitta. The perfect buddhas arise from the altruistic mind, so whatever Dharma you practice, the ultimate fruition must be an altruistic mind. It must be immeasurable love. The deity arises from bodhicitta, and having bodhicitta yourself will lead you to temporary birth in the higher realms, and ultimately to the state of enlightenment.

And the altruistic mind is how we attain this. The self-cherishing mind is like a block of ice, and the more you think about yourself, the more it solidifies into an even-harder block.

But every time you give rise to altruism, the block relaxes somewhat, it melts a bit.

So whatever you are practicing, whichever deity or mantra recitation, it must be based on the mind of bodhicitta. That mind is really what you are habituating to.

The quality of the deity—of all deities—is bodhicitta. The deities possess great love for all beings, and when you practice a deity, the deity’s love is what you should receive. The deity’s love is like a hot cup of tea: when you touch it with your hands, your hands feel warm. This warmth is similar to the feeling of love from the deity, and their love is the actual blessing. When you find this love, it is said that your body, speech, and mind ripen. And how do they ripen? They ripen through the altruistic mind, which is the blessing that melts the block of ice. The more altruism arises, the more self-clinging diminishes, and in the end, no concept of a self remains. At that point, all the ice of self-clinging has completely melted and become one with the ocean water.

The only way we can melt the block of ice is with a mind of love, and doing a retreat is an opportunity to accomplish this. Such an opportunity arises only as a result of the karma you accumulated in the past. Due to your previous virtuous actions, you have obtained a precious human body, you have met with the holy Dharma, and you have the wish to practice it.

That is an incredibly good fortune, and it is the reason a retreat is such an excellent opportunity. So bring to mind this opportunity you have found, and rejoice in it.

When some people do a retreat, they think: “I’m going to do a retreat. I have to practice.

I have to meditate because I want to be free from suffering.” But that is actually not a completely pure motivation. There is still self-clinging in that motivation, and self-clinging is the very cause of all suffering. It is this “I” and this “I want” that leads to other thoughts of attachment, aversion, and ignorance—the causes of all the habitual imprints in our mind. The vessel for all these imprints, karma, and so on is this notion of “I.”

With regard to the altruistic mind in the context of the Buddha's life story, some people have said that the Buddha didn't have compassion because he abandoned his wife, Yashodhara.

If you think about it, though, he didn't leave her out of a lack of compassion. Had he stayed with Yashodhara and upheld his kingdom, nobody would know anything about the Buddha. There wouldn't be a Buddha. But realizing that sentient beings in samsara suffer and need to be liberated, the Buddha was motivated with an altruistic mind, thinking: "I need to liberate all sentient beings." This altruistic intention is why he gave up his wife and kingdom and so on, and because he gave up all worldly concerns, his teachings remain and we still hear them today. Nowadays, the Buddha's teachings still shine like the sun in this world, and through them, many hundreds and thousands of sentient beings have a chance to become liberated.

Even if you only think about this life, even if you just want to benefit your family and friends, you can bring about their greatest benefit through developing an altruistic mind of love for all sentient beings. "The perfect buddhas arise from the altruistic mind," it is said. When you practice the deity in retreat, through visualizing the deity's form you purify the karmic imprints of your ordinary body, and by reciting the deity's mantra you bring to an end all grasping at ordinary speech and sound. Ultimately, through cultivating an altruistic intention, the obscurations of the mind—the clinging to the imprint of "I"—will be purified, which is what must happen. Therefore, with the motivation of doing our practice for the benefit of all sentient beings, we develop the mind of immeasurable love again and again. With that intention, even if you just recite a single mantra, its activity will pervade all sentient beings in the three realms of samsara. By knowing how to merge this altruistic motivation with your meditation, you will find that meditation actually brings about the greatest benefit for sentient beings.

In the *Great Liberation Sutra*, the Buddha said that in order to practice a deity, first we must recognize that all sentient beings possess buddha-nature, and that their aggregates, sense sources, and elements are the deity by nature. Though these are immature for the time being, when they mature, they mature into their true nature as the deity. Knowing the benefits of this view, mature your own mind-stream by developing immeasurable, all-pervasive love!

Regarding the ultimate level, the Buddha said in the *Great Liberation Sutra* that meditating in the state of mahamudra for just a single session is more beneficial to sentient beings than saving the lives of all beings in the three realms of samsara. Though we wander in samsara, it is our body that wanders in samsara, and though we may have to engage in samsaric activities, our mind can still be in a state of non-distraction, wishing for the benefit all sentient beings, knowing there is no duality between our minds. Even though a great variety of bodies seem to appear in the six realms of samsara, in actuality there is no duality within the mind; there is only one mind, which is just like light-energy in that there is just one thing called “light” in this world. The appearance of beings in their distinct forms is like non-dual mind entering as light into a light bulb: there is the appearance of a body—the light bulb—but in actuality there is only one thing called “light” manifesting.

This mind, this one mind, is empty and clear; it knows its empty nature. When you meditate, you gain this experience of the mind that knows it is empty, and this knowing is clarity.

It knows that self and other are indivisible, and that the mind is like space. This clear knowing is the *yab*, or the male aspect, and emptiness is the *yum*, the female aspect.

This experience of knowing causes the mind to be very happy, and as a result, the ice block of dualistic grasping actually melts in countless

sentient beings, which is the purpose of visualizing the deity during the generation stage.

Following the generation stage, the completion stage is practiced, wherein you let the mind rest within the view—the natural state itself—without any dualistic grasping, without any thoughts whatsoever. You remain within this space-like, clear, and empty state without engaging the mind, and the recognition of this clear and empty nature is a very happy, blissful, and joyful state. In that moment of remaining within the non-dual state of emptiness that sees no duality between self and other, the dualistic grasping of countless sentient beings also falls apart.

The ultimate fruition of the generation stage *is* the completion stage, and you are actually practicing the generation stage for the sake of realizing the ultimate completion stage. So in the generation stage you recognize the true nature of sentient beings as being like an unripe fruit or a block of ice, knowing that once the block of ice melts, there is no more separation or duality, which is the completion stage. This is a way to re-understand the relationship between the generation and completion stages.

It really makes no difference which deity you practice. If you have a connection to a certain deity from a previous life and you feel very drawn to that deity, you can practice that deity. Personally, for example, I practice Yamantaka, Vajrakilaya, Vajrayogini, and Chakrasamvara. The point is habituation and familiarization with the deity, and no matter which deity you habituate to, the blessings are the same. The difference comes about through how long you practice and how much you familiarize yourself with a deity. Either way, the fruition of the deity practice is the completion stage, which is resting in the non-dual view. The ultimate result of the Vajrakilaya practice, for example, is to attain the essence of non-duality. Ultimately, that is the whole fruition of our practice: the realization that self and other—that everything—is inseparable.

While some people like to practice a certain yidam deity due to the love and devotion they feel for that deity, they often wonder why, even with such devotion, they still cannot visualize the deity clearly. Actually, in general, clear visualization of the deity very difficult. It is difficult for me as well. Therefore, there are basically two ways of practicing a yidam deity. In the first, you visualize the deity clearly, and in the other, the deity might not appear clearly, but you really feel love and devotion for the deity, like the love a mother has for her child. Through this, a great love for the deity arises that is so powerful that you never forget the deity. The second way of practicing the deity is actually the better one.

There are outer, inner, and secret aspects of a retreat. The outer aspect is to remember the deity in your daily life and then engage in its practice. Whenever you have time, you visualize the deity and you recite the deity's mantra, hearing it over and over again during all of your activities. In this way, the practice becomes like a retreat.

For the inner retreat, by habituating yourself to the deity, the deity will appear to you in various forms and sizes. This inner aspect of the deity happens when the deity appears within your mind instantly, especially when you encounter difficulties. At those times, the deity arises naturally.

In terms of the secret retreat, even if the deity's form doesn't arise, there is always the feeling that the deity is there in your mind. It is like a mother thinking of her child; it never leaves your mind. This secret aspect is the most precious kind of deity yoga practice. So after you have completed a retreat, you should continue to recite the deity's mantra and keep the deity present in your mind as you go about your daily activities. Even if the visualization is not so clear, it is best if your love for the deity always remains within your mind.

The real accomplishment of the deity happens when the deity never leaves your mind.

At that point, whenever you encounter difficulties, whenever you give rise to afflictive emotions or experience any kind of suffering, you will instantly remember the deity.

And through your love and trust in the deity, you will be able to let go of suffering and its causes. This cannot be accomplished without the stability of great love and trust in the deity. Often people say that the deity practice is of no benefit, that it doesn't really help. But the people who say this have no great love for the deity. When they see an image of the deity, they don't really feel anything special at all; for them it is like looking at a photograph of a person for whom they have no special love. Therefore, feeling love for the deity is crucial, and that feeling of love is the quality you habituate to during your retreat until it never leaves your mind. At that point you will be able to remember the deity in all your activities.

An excellent quality that Tibetans have is that they are able to immediately remember the deity when they encounter difficulties—for instance, they call out to Tara when trouble arises. It brings great benefit to call to Tara or Vajrayogini or any other deity when you have difficulties. It doesn't matter which deity, because a hundred thousand deities have a single life-force, which on the relative level is immeasurable love and compassion, and on the ultimate level is the state of mahamudra. But since it is very difficult for us to always remain in the ultimate state, it is most important for us to develop immeasurable love for sentient beings, and to recognize love as being the actual mind of the deity. It is already excellent if you understand and habituate to just that. A person who habituates to love for the deity will naturally have a kind and loving feeling toward anyone they meet, and their mind will naturally be in a more relaxed state. And whenever they encounter difficulties, they will remember the deity, and they will be able to find a solution to their problem. That is what happens after one has really habituated to the practice of the deity for a long time. But even if we just begin by

practicing the deity for a short time in retreat, we will start to gain that experience.

So being able to remember and keep the deity in our mind is extremely powerful, and it is something we can understand if we think about it logically. It really makes sense, and it is something we must trust and believe in. Then, whenever you encounter difficulties, by remembering the deity you can turn away all negative karmic imprints. For example, Tara has saved my own life eight times already.

How can Tara save someone's life? It happens because, in the face of difficulty, I am thinking about the deity, not the difficulty. The basis of mind is like a mirror, and there is nothing that actually possesses any true, inherent existence. There is no self, and there is no other. If you really know this, which is the meditation of mahamudra, then you realize that your true nature is not an inherently existing self. In fact, there is no self at all; there is just divine deity nature.

If you are unable to remember this deity nature and if the deity does not come to mind, you will only have the habitual imprint of the sense of an "I." For example, if you fall down, you think that "I fell." All karmic imprints come from this notion of "I," and we have been habituating to this imprint since beginning-less time in samsara. This imprint is the very reason we wander in samsara, and it is why we are like a block of ice. Later when we enter the bardo, we bring with us all of our habitual imprints of a self—even though there actually is no solid, individual self to be found anywhere in existence. And because the self can't be seen, it can't really be destroyed, in some sense. It cannot be burned away by fire or drowned in water, and it cannot die. And actually, there are no hellish states of existence, and so forth. But still, there is this thought of an existing self.

In the *Thirty-Seven Practises of the Bodhisattva*, it states: "All suffering without exception comes from wishing for one's own happiness." If you

are able to remember the deity, however, you will realize that there is actually no “I” at all. It is just a false belief, and the Buddha said that this false belief is the cause of sentient beings’ ignorance. But since your mind is like a mirror, when you bring to mind the deity, at that very moment your mind *is* the deity, and all ordinary karma and imprints come to an end naturally. People with some wisdom can actually understand this. We just need a method, which is to always have the deity in mind.

In order to keep the deity within the mind, we recite a deity’s mantra continuously, over and over again, and we recall our love for the deity. This is crucial, and if you fail in this vital point—if you just visualize the deity here and there, without actually holding the deity in your mind with love at all times—you will not be able to instantly bring the deity to mind when you encounter difficult circumstances. This will cause you to naturally just do whatever is best for the self, as you will consider the self as most important, which will make it difficult to turn away hindrances and obstacles. So you must develop a real trust and love for the deity, and always keep the deity within your mind. If this can be accomplished, the deity will really have the power to protect you in this and future lives, as well as in the bardo.

The various manifestations of the bardo are nothing but the mind’s projections of its own afflictive emotions and habitual imprints, and if you are able to remember the deity, there will be no afflictive emotions, since they do not actually exist. And there will be no projections of the three lower realms, since they do not actually exist either. Those of you who possess some intelligence and wisdom will understand this, and through this understanding you will be able to make an effort in remembering the deity again and again. Anyone who is able to do a retreat and practice in this way is very fortunate. It is like having a fire in the stove.