

Introduction to the Ngöndro Practices

Ngöndro practice is an essential practice for anyone embarking on the Vajrayana path. Ngöndro means “something that precedes” as it is a preliminary practice for anyone wishing higher tantric teachings. Through the Ngöndro practice, one is able to purify negativity within the body, speech, and mind, and accumulate merit in an efficient and precise way. This practice forms the basis of all other practices. It is such an important practice that Lord Jigten Sumgön proclaimed that “the Ngöndro is even more important than the higher practices.”

Ngondro practice, according to the Drigung Kagyu tradition, consists of five parts: Refuge, Vajrasattva, Mandala Offering, Guru Yoga, and Bodhicitta. Each of these practices must be completed at least 111,111 times.

Refuge Practice

We begin by taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. By doing full length prostrations to the Triple Gem as we recite the refuge prayer, we are bringing the action of our bodies into our practice. One hundred thousand prostrations are a powerful exercise in humility, security, and determination. By surrendering to the Triple Gem, your life becomes connected purely with Dharma practice. Refuge practice aims at clearing away obscurations and accumulating good impressions.

Vajrasattva

Having already surrendered through refuge practice, you now need to purify yourself and further acknowledge what you have surrendered. Vajrasattva, or Dorje Sempa in Tibetan, is a peaceful deity associated with purification, particularly of anger and hatred. Through visualization and recitation of Vajrasattva’s mantra, you purify your body, speech, and mind, removing negative karma and obscurations.

Mandala Offering

The mandala is seen as a model of the ordinary universe, which is brought together during visualization as a gift to be given away to all enlightened beings. This powerful act of generosity is a rehearsal of your own release of interest in the ordinary material world. Having completed the Vajrasattva purification practice, you are ready to give up everything, including your purified person. Ultimately, you offer yourself along with all the outer offerings so that “you” no longer exist.

Guru Yoga

The guru, or lama in Tibetan, becoming a living model of enlightenment and a vital channel to make the teachings come alive to the individual student. Thus, the mentor-bonding or guru yoga practice is most important. After surrendering, purification, and offering yourself and the entire universe, you are ready to identify with your guru. You learn to perceive your guru as a perfect buddha in order to purify your own misperceptions.

Bodhicitta

The Drigung Kagyu lineage places so much emphasis on the development of bodhicitta that they have made it part of their Ngöndro practices. Since buddhahood is the result of the mental formation of bodhicitta, one cannot attain enlightenment without it, even if one practices the highest tantras. So the practice of bodhicitta is the essence of all the teachings of the Buddha and is the single most important path.

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