

Summaries of Venerable Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche's NSS teachings

First weekend: Hinayana teachings

Thinking from the Frame of Mind of Dharma (July 8)

Rinpoche began the first teaching of the 25th Nyingma Summer Seminar by speaking about his own motivation, which is to inspire people at whatever level they are—from those who aim to attain enlightenment in one lifetime to those just making a connection to the Three Jewels. Wherever we are, it takes some level of faith to receive the blessings and go forward on our path. If we doubt ourselves continually, we will always undermine ourselves.

For Dharma to touch us deeply, we need to think from the frame of mind of Dharma. Otherwise, when we are disappointed by outer circumstances or find ourselves on a plateau, we may easily lose inspiration. The path is long, so we must do whatever we can to keep practicing with a full heart. If we always remember impermanence, the suffering of samsara, and the equality of all sentient beings, we'll be able to utilize and integrate whatever occurs in our life.

It's important for us to remember the Three Jewels every day. Rinpoche recounted the story of the Buddha, from his birth to his first teachings on the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to that cessation.

We can look at the Four Noble Truths in terms of the five skandhas. Most of the suffering that frightens us is related to the form skandha. All our cherishing and protecting of ourselves is based on this life and this body. Our attachment to this body goes hand in hand with the confusion inherent in the next three skandhas: feeling, conception, and mental formations. The only way to free our consciousness skandha from the other four is by removing our ignorance through following the path of Dharma.

Only by means of the Dharma can we secure ourselves from the suffering of samsara. The absolute Dharma practice is to realize the nature. In the relative, we practice to purify our attachments and to promote universal love and compassion. What makes this difficult is our great love for our ego. We need to keep an eye on this ego to prevent it from getting completely out of control. This is important not just for our path but in all aspects of our life.

We have the immense good fortune to have the Buddha's teachings, but we have to think from their framework in order to appreciate our fortune. If we sulk about our lives, we go outside thinking based on Dharma. If we live conventionally, things may start off well, but as we age and approach death, they will get worse and worse. On the other hand, if we live according to Dharma, we may have troubles early on, but things will keep getting better and we will go from light to light.

The Path to Egolessness of Self (July 9)

The moral discipline of the Hinayana, which involves regularly taking vows and precepts, is important for all of us to practice, especially in this time. Rinpoche said that his greatest satisfaction as a teacher has come through influencing students to transform their conduct—especially around taking life. These changes are based on learning about karma and developing the view that oneself and others are equal. Such transformation is far more significant than gaining abilities such as flying. Holding the vows of all three yanas gives us a meaningful life in which we can serve others.

Our mental habits tend to grow on their own like the horns of an animal. Nagarjuna speaks of four conditions that strengthen our negative habits and make us lose our direction. These are: doing something consistently; doing it vigorously; not thinking that we could remedy the habit; and having the field that triggers us readily available.

Practitioners have an advantage in that we can be more aware of our mind and therefore have more flexibility to do things in a new way. By applying the Four Noble Truths, we can remedy any of our negative habits. When working with an afflictive emotion, we first recognize our pain and then acknowledge its cause—say, insecurity. To arrive at the cessation of that insecurity, we apply the path, which is to let go of our *dak che dzin*, our self-importance.

To let go of self-importance, we investigate whether a singular, unchanging, autonomous self truly exists. If it does, then we must be able to find it in the skandhas. But we can find no self there. We should keep investigating until we reach a state of conviction, which is necessary to eliminate confusion. If we continually observe that the self is not real and that samsara is an illusion, we will attain a state of egolessness of self.

The twelve links of dependent origination that keep us in samsara begin with ignorance. The way to stop our karmic seeds from manifesting as future births in samsara is by interrupting the chain at the links of craving and taking. Since we only crave because we see things as real, when we realize that all phenomena are mere appearances, craving and taking will cease and the father and mother of samsaric birth will stop procreating.

During in-meditation, we accumulate wisdom by seeing how everything is unreal, but during post-meditation, we still engage in accumulating illusory merit. These two accumulations ultimately turn into purification of our emotional and cognitive obscurations. The emotional obscurations are the five afflictive emotions: passion, aggression, ignorance, jealousy, and pride. The cognitive obscurations prevent us from seeing the illusory nature of all phenomena.

Through this process of accumulation and purification, we will eventually stop taking involuntary rebirth. But as bodhisattvas on the path, we will keep taking birth intentionally to traverse the bhumis and merge ourselves with the ultimate truth and attain full enlightenment.

All this is possible because we have the three wisdoms to counteract ignorance. We acquire hearing wisdom by listening to teachings with enough openness and intelligence to make basic sense of them. But hearing wisdom doesn't bring conviction; for that contemplative wisdom is necessary. This involves reviewing what we have heard, analyzing it on our own, and making personal sense of the teachings. Finally, we apply meditative wisdom, which begins with going to our cushion and preparing our mind by practicing shamatha. Then we are in shape to practice vipashyana, in which we experience the teachings we have contemplated directly—seeing the truth as it is, without any fabrications, like a crystal ball reflecting the whole universe.

The Buddha and His Teachings (July 10)

After the Buddha attained enlightenment, he spent some time alone before turning the Wheel of Dharma for the first time. The first two of the Four Noble Truths describe the ground—the relative truth of suffering and its cause. These teachings are easily accessible because the skandhas and other aspects of the relative are apparent in our daily existence. (In this section, Rinpoche encouraged students to gather information on the skandhas and other relative topics by doing online research. Making self-inspired efforts in our studies helps the teachings resonate in us more.)

If we look at any sentient being, such as a fly, we can recognize that, like us, they have five skandhas and that they go toward pleasure and away from pain. The big difference between human beings and flies is that we have *chörab namje kyi sherab*, discerning intelligence. But if we don't use this faculty, we become no different from animals. We can use our intelligence by engaging in mental analysis, such as investigating the existence of the self.

Mental effort in the Dharma can transform our mindstream far more than pursuing knowledge in other areas. Einstein was a great genius in physics, but how much effect did his scientific brilliance have on his grasping? The three wisdoms of the Dharma, on the other hand, directly counteract ignorance, the origin of all suffering.

The difference between relative and absolute truth is the difference between how things appear and how they are. The notion of the two truths is something we're already familiar with. For example, a magician can create illusory butterflies that we understand to be appearances without any absolute reality.

In terms of the relative, anything that functions must be compounded. Furthermore, according to Dharmakirti, a functional world must have three qualities. First, all effects must come from causes and conditions. Second, everything happens in a continuum of moments. Third, everything ceases the instant it arises. For these reasons, all compounded things—all matter and consciousness—are unborn. Everything functions magically. Things appear to be born, dwell, and cease, but on deeper examination, this is all an illusion.

We create our own samsara with our projections. We assume a reality that doesn't exist. Without these projections, the true nature of the universe is nirvana. This is the case whether or not the tathagatas come into the world and teach the Dharma.

The first two Noble Truths is the experience of sentient beings; the second pair is the experience of the Aryas. We are not in a position to fathom their experience, but they do understand ours because they also have been ignorant and have suffered in the past. The buddhas possess two kinds of wisdom: the wisdom that sees the absolute and the wisdom that sees all beings' potential to attain enlightenment. Out of their unconditional love for all beings, they share their wisdom with all who can receive it. And through their transformative power, especially that of speech, they are able to confer their realization to disciples.

The Buddha's teachings are still alive in us, protecting us every day from the destructive power of our emotions, which can be more dangerous than anything coming at us from the outside. By applying the Dharma, the greatest force in the universe, we can transform our mind from a state of turmoil to a state of peace. We can enjoy some level of this transformation in even one session of practice.

We shouldn't see the Dharma as our last resort. More and more, it should become our first option. Rinpoche spoke about how he chose to be a monk rather than go to a conventional school. "This choice I made at age nine," he said, "was the greatest choice I made in my life."

At the end of this teaching, Rinpoche gave refuge vows.

Second weekend: Mahayana teachings

The Four Immeasurables and Prajnaparamita (July 15)

Rinpoche began the first Mahayana talk by reviewing the Four Noble Truths and describing the benefits of applying those teachings, both in our overall path to enlightenment and as a framework for remedying disturbing emotions. Applying these teachings to our immediate situations helps us find small nirvanas in our everyday life.

The Buddha first taught the Mahayana when he turned the Wheel of Dharma for the second time, at Vulture Peak mountain in Rajgir. There he taught the Prajnaparamita to an audience of mostly bodhisattvas. These teachings were not available to all because their subject matter—emptiness—isn't something many people can understand.

In some ways, the Mahayana teachings are easier to practice than those of the Hinayana. First of all, we can be householders. Second, the practice begins with three things we constantly think about and put all our energy into: we want to have happiness and the source of happiness; we want to be free from suffering and the source of suffering; and we want to keep increasing our happiness, never letting it decrease. When we understand the sound reasoning

that all sentient beings want these three things just as much as we do, then we have the basis to practice the four immeasurables.

By practicing loving-kindness, we will come to feel as strongly about others' happiness as we do about our own. This is necessary before we can take the next step of making the happiness of others more important than our own, especially when the two seem to conflict. Once it dawns clearly in our mind how important it is to let go of our *dak che dzin*, then prioritizing others won't seem like a sacrifice. Then we can start training in small ways, such as by losing an argument willingly.

Instead of encouraging us to make big leaps, the Buddha recommended gradually cultivating our strength through the four immeasurables practice and through reflecting on how much our self-centered mind has harmed us throughout our lives. Since we can be sure that, left unchecked, it will continue to harm us in the future, we should ask ourselves, "If I don't change now, when will I change?" Now is the time to get free, as best we can.

We can proceed similarly in our cultivation of compassion, which begins by recognizing our constant wish to be free from suffering and reflecting on the fact that all beings have the same wish. For ourselves and others, this wish encompasses all types and levels of suffering, so our wish for all beings must be freedom from suffering altogether.

Loving-kindness and compassion have no limits and ultimately come together in a single wish for all sentient beings to attain enlightenment—the ultimate happiness and ultimate freedom from suffering. When we pray for beings to be enlightened, we're not praying for them to transform like a cow turning into a yak but to realize their innate potential. In other words, we're wishing for beings to be themselves, in the most profound way possible. As the *Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra* says, "There's nothing to be removed and nothing to be added." Whoever has a mind has jnana, and whoever has jnana can be awakened to their enlightened nature.

To awaken to our enlightened nature, we apply the three wisdoms, in particular by studying, contemplating, and meditating on the Prajnaparamita sutras, which are encapsulated in the Heart Sutra. If the Mahayana teachings move us deeply, that is a sign we are ready to immerse ourselves fully in the bodhisattva path. Then we are in a position to make leaps and bounds of progress, giving great meaning to our lives. This is Rinpoche's aspiration for all of us and the reason he has been working for more than thirty years to bring the Mahayana teachings to this part of the world.

Q&A and Bodhisattva Vow (July 17)

Rinpoche spent the majority of the teaching session answering questions. The topics included: the difference between doubt and productive questioning; how matter and consciousness are continuously rising and ceasing; how what is unborn seems to be born; what is and what isn't

mind; distinguishing between reproach and guilt; the positive sadness of *kyoshe*; trusting basic goodness in this “troubled age”; how mindfulness doesn’t interfere with spontaneity; having a can-do attitude; and the similarity between falling asleep and the dissolution that occurs at death.

Rinpoche ended the Q&A by encouraging students to ask questions and reminding us of the Buddha’s words: “I have shown you the path of liberation, but liberation depends on you.”

Next, Rinpoche spoke about what makes the Mahayana *maha*, or “great.” The focus of the Mahayana is much broader than that of the Hinayana—not individual salvation but liberation of all beings from the ocean of samsara. To hold such a great aspiration, we need to make a positive connection to all beings based on love and care.

Love for ourselves comes automatically, but cultivating love for all other beings requires reasoning. We must contemplate how everyone longs for happiness and freedom from suffering just as much as we do. This irrefutable reasoning is the bedrock of our bodhicitta.

This thought of equality is a necessary precursor to practicing the four immeasurables and generating aspiration and application bodhicitta. The merit we accumulate through these relative bodhicitta practices gives us a good push to realize the absolute truth. Understanding emptiness is worthless if it doesn’t reduce our self-love and promote our love for others. Therefore, we must practice relative and absolute truth together in order to attain enlightenment.

Rinpoche then led the assembly in taking the bodhisattva vow, which he prefaced by explaining the components of the ceremony. As a preliminary to taking the vow, we do the seven-branch practice: prostration, offering, confession, rejoicing, requesting the buddhas and bodhisattvas turn to the Wheel of the Dharma, requesting them to remain in the world, and dedicating the merit. In the main part of the vow, we recite the verses for arousing aspiration and application bodhicitta. Aspiration bodhicitta is like the wish to go somewhere. Application bodhicitta is the act of going, in this case by practicing the six paramitas.

Third weekend: Vajrayana teachings

Practicing the Vajrayana from the Ground Up (July 22)

Students often want to connect with the Vajrayana teachings in the hopes of experiencing a big boom of awakening, but before anything like that can happen, we need to work with our mind and emotions from the ground up.

Without the self-understanding we gain from the Buddha’s teachings, we operate like machines that produce suffering. What’s happening in the world is a reflection of what’s happening in individuals’ mindstreams of individuals, which are afflicted by disturbing emotions coming from

our strong sense of self. To remedy this, we need to understand the Sutrayana teachings on the two truths.

The relative truth is the entry point into the absolute because it is far easier to comprehend. The Prajnaparimita teachings lay out all aspects of the relative and show that they are empty by nature. The point of studying these teachings is to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings by discovering the inseparability of samsara and nirvana. In fact, the very nature of samsara is nirvana. If we would like to attain a state of bliss, we can only find that in the realm of our own experience, by seeing the truth as it is.

According to the Heart Sutra, the absolute truth, or dharmata, can be described in eight ways, all of which are like pointing a finger at the moon, not the moon itself. All dharmas are empty and have no characteristics, no birth, no cessation, no impurity, no purity, no decrease, and no increase. The Heart Sutra covers all aspects of ground, path, and fruition, showing how every category of relative phenomena is empty: the five skandhas, the twelve ayatanas, the eighteen dhatus, the twelve nidanas, the Four Noble Truths, and the fruition of the path.

We call emptiness the “absolute truth” only because we reach it at the very limit of our investigations, when we have thoroughly examined the relative and have no further to go. Having come to the conclusion that there is no reality to be found, Avalokiteshvara says, “Since there is no obscuration of mind, there is no fear. They transcend falsity and attain complete nirvana.” Rinpoche called these words “the most profound verse you could ever hear in the whole of the Buddhadharma.”

Rinpoche next gave some teachings on the Third Turning, which is a bridge between the Mahayana and the Vajrayana. The Buddha gave these teachings to clear away five obstacles: faintheartedness, arrogance, eternalism, nihilism, and a lack of unconditional love for all beings.

The *Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra* gives three reasons all beings can become enlightened. First, the dharmakaya is always illuminating. It is always present as the nature of all things. Second, suchness cannot be differentiated. In their absolute nature, there is no difference between buddhas and sentient beings. Third, all sentient beings have the disposition—the potential to awaken themselves. This disposition can be broken down into two parts. There is the natural disposition, which is present in all beings. Then there is the develop disposition, which comes from taking an interest in the path of liberation and meeting the five conditions for bodhicitta to be born in oneself. With these two dispositions, we can attain enlightenment in no time.

Rinpoche concluded the teaching session by bestowing a transmission of liberation by hearing.

Essential Points of the Vajrayana (July 24)

The Vajrayana teachings emphasize the importance of faith and devotion: in the lineage, in the masters who give us instructions, in the practice, and in our own warmth that unfolds over time. Westerners tend to want to know the reasons for everything, but it's important to be able to follow instructions without always needing an explanation. Because the dharmata is beyond concepts, if we try to pin it down with our conceptual mind, we will become lost. Therefore, the instruction is to let it speak for itself.

Along with the Three Jewels, in the Vajrayana we take refuge in the Three Roots: lama, yidam, and dakini. The one who brings all of these to us personally is the guru in human form. The relationship with the guru is indispensable if we are to attain the ultimate and relative siddhis. Some say the reason there's not much fruition these days, despite the Vajrayana being taught widely in many parts of the world, is that students lack faith and devotion.

“Vajra” is the weapon Indra holds in his hand, which vanquishes his opponents and cannot itself be vanquished. In the context of Vajrayana, the word refers to the unceasing continuum nature, which is inseparable emptiness and luminosity. This nature is indestructible and overcomes all delusions. “Yana” refers to a lift, something that brings you up from where we have fallen and are suffering. In the Vajrayana, we attain enlightenment in at most sixteen lifetimes, and a diligent practitioner of the higher tantras can become enlightened in one lifetime.

Rinpoche gave a brief history of the Vajrayana. Except for his teachings to King Indrabodhi and the King of Shambhala, there are no stories of the Buddha teaching the Vajrayana in this world. The Vajrayana is continuously taught by Vajrasattva in Akanishtha, and the teachings are brought to our world and to the dakinis by Vajrapani. The Buddha Shakyamuni is the Sutrayana Buddha of this world, and Guru Rinpoche, his immediate emanation who gathered many teachings from the land of the dakinis, is the Vajrayana Buddha.

Vajrayana is also known as *tantra* or *gyu*, which refers to how it remains unchanging from ground to path to fruition. Tantra is also described as *yi kyobpa* because it hijacks our sixth consciousness and brings it to the sacred world. The two phases of sadhana practice—generation and accomplishment—bring us out of our normal mind of grasping and fixation and lead to a state of great bliss. Unlike in the Sutrayana, where we sow a seed and wait three countless eons for the fruit to appear, in the Vajrayana, there is no difference between ground and fruition. The path is only necessary to purify our misperceptions so that we can see what is already here, like a person being cured of jaundice who can now see the whiteness of a snow mountain.

In all the schools from Cittamatra onwards, there is no external world outside the subjective mind. What we experience in our dreams is based on the unfolding of seeds in the alaya, but the same is true of our waking experience. The subjective mind makes the objective world. If we purify all our obscurations and burn all seeds of negativity, we will perceive the dharmata and experience pure appearance.

The Vajrayana path is the union of the two accumulations. We accumulate immense merit by practicing *utpattikrama*, the generation phase, which involves visualization practice. We accumulate immense wisdom by practicing *sampannakrama*, the accomplishment phase. The skillful means of the Vajrayana, which are inseparable from the Vajrayana's wisdom, enable us to accomplish swiftly what takes three countless eons in the Sutrayana. With these two phases, we can accomplish the two kayas—dharmakaya and rupakaya—in one lifetime.

At the end of the talk, Rinpoche expressed hope that, by practicing the Vajrayana, all students of Mangala Shri Bhuti would be able to meet their deaths in one of three favorable ways. The highest way is to meet death with joy and excitement at the prospect of making leaps and bounds during the time of dissolution. The next best is to meet death without any fear or qualms. The third is to meet death without regret. To help us take advantage of our opportunity, Rinpoche encouraged us to stop procrastinating but instead focus on every day as if it's an entire lifetime, equating the end of each day with the time of death.