

# assignments 2

## reflection

### TRANSITION

Coming out of cloister is not always a smooth process. Life begins to make its claims before we even have released our boundaries, and mind starts to claw at the edges of the space we have been holding with such gentle precision and humor. Over the next few weeks until our second cloister weekend, we will be looking at transition, and more.

For now, take time whenever you have it to reflect on the weekend as a whole. For example, What boundaries most got under my skin? Which did I feel entitled to dismiss? How did that feel? What did I do about it? Did I disregard any unintentionally, out of habit?

As we do at the start and end of each formal session, acknowledge the judgments of good, bad, and indifferent, and let them go, rejoicing in the goodness of our own and each other's practice.

### CYCLES

The sense of "I am a single autonomous individual" coupled with feeling good or uplifted about our practice can lead us to assume that this richness is one step along the way which is now not going to lapse. We think it is something lasting.

The reality actually is that we all have energetic cycles, sometimes up, others down, and this is not a bad thing. This is natural process, and it applies to spiritual practice as well.

At times cloister and boundaries will feel uplifting, energizing, even euphoric, while other times itch for the moment of release. Both of those can and should be folded into our practice. Indeed, both are our practice, if we recognize them as such.

The point is not to get to a blissful state and remain there. In fact, a signal feature of the Buddhadharmā is recognition that this is not enough. The point is to reveal the resiliency to engage, fully embodied, with whatever arrives, externally and internally.

Reflect on how you response to your natural cycles. For example, what do I do when I hit an energetic low in practice? When I get to a euphoric high? What do I make either of these mean? What beliefs arise in each case? How much of my energetic feelings do I solidify? In what ways do I turn that into a storyline about myself as a monolithic, independent, and lasting entity? How might I undo some of this storyline, and the habit of retelling it?

## readings

### From the Sutra of Densely Arrayed Ornaments [Gandavyuha Sutra]

Buddha Shakyamuni

*Sangha! Do not accept my Dharma merely out of respect for me,  
Rather, examine and investigate it  
Like a gold merchant tests raw ore  
By rubbing, cutting, and melting.*

### Excerpt from interview with Bhikku Bodhi

(Translator of the Pali canon suttas into English)

Many new Western Buddhists take the word practice as almost synonymous with meditation and then drive a sharp wedge between study and practice. They assume that if a monk is devoted to scholarship, he can't be a serious practitioner, as if scholarship were somehow antithetical to real practice. I have to admit that my own meditation practice has fallen far short of my ideal, but I ascribe this largely to a chronic health condition (a personal karmic obstacle with which I must deal) rather than to a dedication to scholarship and a concern to translate the Buddhist scriptures.

We should remember that in Buddhist Asia down through the centuries, in virtually all traditions, the main task of the monastic order has been the preservation and transmission of the Buddhist teachings, done primarily through the intensive study, investigation and propagation of Buddhist scriptures and philosophy. This has formed the foundation stone upon which all higher achievements in Buddhist practice have rested, the skeleton that has supported the muscles and organs of Buddhism. While all traditions preserve accounts of unlettered meditators who have attained deep realization, the most outstanding representatives in all traditions have been those who combine both doctrinal sophistication and meditative realization. One suspects that even the hagiographical stories of illiterate sages are pious exaggerations.

The interrelationship of study and scholarship with practice is, I feel, a complex issue about which there is no single answer suitable for everyone. Some people will naturally gravitate towards one or another of these two poles. What can be said unequivocally is that scholarly knowledge without practical application is barren; vigorous meditation practice without the guiding light of clear conceptual understanding is futile. Without knowledge of the texts, I fear, within a couple of generations a practice tradition will easily become diluted, chewed up and digested by the surrounding culture, especially when that culture is a theistic or a materialistic one.

## **Excerpt from *Rebel Buddha***

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche

A spiritual question is primarily one we ask ourselves and process alone. Just as our answers must come from within, our questions come from inside us too. They come from the same place. All our questions are connected to something we already know. Each question will lead to an answer that will lead to further questions and so on. As our understanding grows, our questions become clearer and our answers more meaningful. This is how the spiritual path progresses.

At some point, you'll be certain that you have reached a full understanding of your question. You'll recognize it because it's not someone else's answer—it's your own. You should keep questioning until you reach that point. How can you tell if you've stopped searching before you've reached that kind of certainty? One sign is when you look to someone else for answers to your questions. That brings your search to a halt. At that point, your inquisitive mind is no longer working.

It's true that others can help us, but that doesn't mean there is someone out there who can give us all the answers. We can rely on the teachings of the Buddha and on spiritual friends to some degree. Knowledge that comes from sources we respect can help us clarify and refine our understanding. But that doesn't mean that we fully accept what anyone says and give up our search, or that once we've heard from someone we consider to be an authority, it's the end of the matter. Their discovery and understanding of the truth doesn't help us if we don't really connect with them. If their experience doesn't agree with our own, then it's of no use to us, regardless of how profound a truth it is for them.

Eventually, you'll arrive at some form of final question—a sense of uncertainty or doubt that stays with you for a while. By the time you arrive at that clear question, you'll already have made a considerable journey. You'll already have answered hundreds or thousands of other questions in order to get there. Having a clear question means you know clearly what it is that you don't know. Now you have a question that you can take to your teachers or look up in books. On the other hand, if you ask a teacher a question that isn't clear to you, then nothing he or she says can help you. There can be no clear answer to a half-baked question. On the other hand, if you're simply looking for answers, any answer, then you'll find thousands of books—Buddhist books, Christian books, New Age books, and what have you—that answer all kinds of questions. But none of the facts in those books can enlighten you if your question is vague.

The wisdom we're looking for is not just an answer we get from a religious person or subject matter expert who tells us what to think. Real wisdom is when you find a true question. When you find it, you should not rush to answer it. Stay with it for a while. Make friends with it. We live in "instant times"—instant messaging, instant pictures, fast food—and our mind is accustomed these days to instant gratification. If we bring this expectation to our spiritual path, however, we'll be disappointed. Some of our questions can't be answered right away. We must be as patient as scientists are when they run their experiments and diligently evaluate and verify their findings.

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We often mix together spirituality and religion as if they were one thing. But this doesn't quite work. A spiritual path can exist within or outside a religious context. Religion and spirituality can be complementary or separate practices and experiences. A spiritual path is an inner journey that begins with questions about who we are, and about the nature and meaning of our existence. It's naturally a process of introspection and contemplation.

Religion, as conventionally defined, refers to a set of beliefs about the cause and nature of the universe, our relationship to the creation and creator, and the source of spiritual authority. We can accept those beliefs at face value or explore and examine our own experience of them. Some religions embrace such questioning, while others discourage it, either openly or implicitly. The point is, we need to be clear about what we're really doing in our spiritual or religious life.

Although Buddhism can be practiced "religiously," in many respects, it isn't really a religion. Because of its emphasis on questioning and working with the mind, it is spiritual in nature. But because it relies on logical analysis and reasoning, as well as on meditation, many Buddhist teachers regard Buddhism as a science of mind rather than a religion. In each meditation session, we gather knowledge about the mind through observation, questioning, and testing. We do this over and over, until we gradually develop a meaningful understanding of our own mind. Some people may even become weary of Buddhism because it gives them so much work to do—they have to ask all the questions and find all their own answers.

The alternative to taking on this responsibility is to let religion do the job for us. We can give up just a little of our critical intelligence by not asking too many questions, which is what most of us do. Or we can go all the way, give up all our questions, and become religious fundamentalists of one sort or another. Then we are relieved from all worries about what to think and why.

In whatever way we label the teachings of the Buddha—as a religion or spiritual path—the body of knowledge that comprises the Buddhist scriptures is not intended to be a substitute for your own questioning process. It's more like a well-equipped research laboratory where you can find tools of all kinds to investigate your own experience.

## Excerpt from Book Seven of *The Treasury of Knowledge*

Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye  
Karma Yeshe Chödrön translation

### *On the way to generate the prajna that comes from contemplation in general*

*Clear knowing comes of contemplating the significance of what you heard.  
In this approach, examination and investigation consist of inner dialogue.*

It is vital to foster the **clear knowing** through the prajna that **comes of contemplating the significance of what is heard**. It is in the process of contemplating terminology and meaning well that we cut through the superimposition of indecision through (1) rough examination and (2) intricate investigation.

Listening one time through, we may feel we have attained a rough understanding, yet a definitive comprehension escapes us. This is because it is through intricate investigation of each word's meaning, working it this way and that against a broad range of scripture and reasoning, that clear knowing arises with authenticity.

**In this approach**, the way to contemplate is to engage in what may be called an “**inner dialogue**” on two levels. The first of these consists of **examination** which is the level of rough overview. The second is **investigation**, which is intricately subtle. This process yields profound understanding of the meaning of the target object of knowledge with reliability.

*When associated with ordinary thought, examination is mundane;  
Associated with prajna, it is supramundane.  
Investigation is the mindset of fine and precise analysis.*

The first of these, **examination**, is “inner dialogue as sustained sensation.” **When associated with ordinary conceptual thought** applied to specified target objects of knowledge, it is **mundane**. **Associated with prajna**, precise knowledge about what transcends the ordinary, it is **supramundane**.

This is an understanding that is a rough overview, yielding a general identification such as “This is a vase,” or “That is fabric.” We can break this down into two subcategories. Mundane or ordinary examination is that associated with ordinary conceptual thought. Supramundane or transcendent examination is associated with the prajna that engages the significance of how things actually are.

The second of these, investigation, is “inner dialogue that determines intricately.” Here too, when associated with ordinary conceptual thought applied to specified target objects of knowledge, it is mundane. Associated with prajna, precise knowledge about what transcends the ordinary, it is supramundane.

This level of understanding is more specific and decisive in character, for example, “this is a well-crafted vase,” or “This is a low quality vase,” or “This fabric color is lovely,” or “The

color of this fabric is ugly.” In other words, it makes determinations about things in finer detail. We can break it down to subcategories to parallel those stated above.

In this way, the prajna born of contemplation is generated through the dual application of rough examination and intricate investigation of the topics heard.

### **Excerpt on Integrative Practice**

Based on the teachings of Drupon Khenpo Lodro Namgyal  
Rigpe Dorje Institute, Pullahari Monastery

The Buddha instructs us to investigate his teachings with a vigor like that of a zealous gold merchant testing ore before a purchase. Buddhist spiritual practice includes subjecting Dharma teachings to robust examination and investigation. This process of engaged dialogue with the teachings is critical for the transformation of Dharma studies from mere words to integrated knowledge.

As Drupon Khenpo explains:

*In the context of Dharma study, one examines the words together with the meaning, thinking about them a lot, pondering and reflecting on the meaning to clarify precisely what is meant.*

*That process necessarily raises questions requiring answers. A dialogue is involved, a give and take of questions and answers. As one engages in this investigation of the meaning of the words taught, qualms come up, perhaps seeming contradictions or things that don't gel with your point of view. Asking questions is critical to clearing up reservations.*

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The Buddha taught the Dharma to assist us in letting go of the subjectivity that colors our mind, preventing us from engaging things as they are, rather than as we take them to be.

Seeing things as they truly are is the central purpose of prajna (precise knowledge), the sharp intelligence which is the faculty enabling us to understand the authentic meaning of Dharma teachings and integrate it into our experience. Without it, one is unable to penetrate teachings, much less incorporate them into our lives. Not only that, but there is a danger of distorting the intended meaning of teachings through giving subjective impressions prominence over objectivity.

That is not to say that we should not bring our personal views and experience to bear in the integrative process. On the contrary—listening, contemplating, and meditating is a process of ongoing, kind, and active dialogue that is supposed to change us organically, not turn us into slaves to an ideology. The dialogue occurs between the views we have developed, consciously and unconsciously, on one hand and the view of Dharma on the other.

Dialogue is necessarily a two-way street. Either investing our own views with incontestable supremacy through pride or following Dharma blindly in sole reliance on blind faith does not foster active exchange and growth. The crucial factor here is to strike a balance between these two counterproductive poles.

Thus, when the Buddha urges us to be like a skillful gold merchant testing ore, he is inviting us to subject not only his teachings, but even our most cherished ideas, to skillful and reasoned analysis. Size up our views against the Dharma, keeping the gold and shedding the dross. This is not always—or even often—easy, but its potential for spiritual development is immense.

It takes harmonious conditions, some measure of confidence in the Buddha, and patience with ourselves. In a time focused on immediate gratification, this long slow building of intimacy with our mind, our views, our habits, and our responses to the Dharma may raise all manner of objections: it is too conceptual. It is not conceptual enough. The conceptual cannot conduce to attaining the nonconceptual. It takes too long. Nothing is happening. This is where giving the Buddha the benefit of a doubt plays a valuable role. This tiny modicum of faith eases the bumps in the road.

To accomplish all this, practice aims at cultivating a nourishing medium for the practice of listening, contemplating, and meditating, consisting of receptivity to the teachings, actively retaining them in mind, and pure motivation buttressed by examination and investigation. The entirety is infused with the practice of the six paramitas.

The process may seem impenetrable at first, if we are not used to it. Like any skill, however, the more we train in it, the better our results. The trick is to honestly gauge where we are, and give ourselves over to the practice, gifting ourselves the time to deepen our intimacy with our own experience viewed through the lens of Dharma.

The practice is both integrated and integrative—as we use our heart and our conceptual thought, we bring the two together in balance, in closeness, and integrate a heart-mind view that is not tilted excessively in either direction. From this foundation, we refine our strengths and weaknesses and make progress over time. It is an organic process, requiring all the attention, time, and care of a garden in springtime. This generates a deeply individual dynamic for our Dharma encounters that is self-perpetuating, joyful, and alive!