

Starting Ngondro

By Kathy Wesley. Based on teachings from Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Last revised 6.9.04

Many people are interested in ngondro practice, but want more information about it before deciding whether to begin.

The name Ngondro means “that which goes before,” and indicates that this practice is preliminary to further practices. The ngondro most commonly done in the West is the Mahamudra ngondro, which is part of the Mahamudra practice.

Mahamudra, which means “great seal,” is the highest of meditation practices in the Karma Kagyu Tradition. Through the Mahamudra practice, all of the great Kagyu masters and students of the past have attained awakening.

But before undertaking the main practices of Mahamudra, the student must be prepared by a thorough and detailed study and practice of the Buddhist basics: Refuge and Bodhicitta; purification; offering; and guru yoga.

The ngondro practice contains these basics, each of which are repeated 111,111 times to steep the student in their meaning, and to mature and ripen the student’s mindstream.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche says the ngondro practice is where people really start digging into their practice and begin making major changes in their thoughts, words and actions. “You should tell everyone who is doing ngondro to be encouraged,” he said, “because ngondro is the source of all qualities.”

Many people ask, “How do I know when I’m ready to start ngondro?”

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche has said that if you have a regular daily Buddhist practice of 30 minutes or more each day, then you have enough time to begin the ngondro practice.

Additionally, it’s good to begin with the proper motivation and attitude. If you have a keen understanding of

the sufferings of the world and a wish to deepen your own dharma practice out of a motivation to help all beings become liberated from their sufferings, then you have the right attitude for starting the ngondro practice.

Based on Khenpo Rinpoche’s advice, I have a “protocol” for helping people learn about ngondro. It consists of assigned reading and a telephone or in-person consultation about the reading “assignment.”

The initial reading assignment involves two books: “The Torch of Certainty” by Jamgon Kongtrul, and Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche’s “Commentary on the Ngondro Practice.” Both are available from the Namse Bangdzo Bookstore at our “home” center, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra (online at www.namsebangdzo.com).

If you can only afford one book, The Torch of Certainty is the best one to purchase. You can always get the other book later.

In The Torch of Certainty, I would recommend that you read the Introduction and the first two chapters of the book. In Khenpo Rinpoche’s commentary, I would recommend the first two chapters.

It’s fine if you’d like to read the whole book; but if you are pressed for time, the first chapters are all you need for the time being.

After you have read the chapters, then it would be good if you could talk to a more experienced dharma student (preferably one suggested by the Rinpoches to give ngondro advice, but any ngondro practitioner will do) so you can ask questions about what you’ve read.

If you would like to start the practice, you would need two things: 1) the permission from one of the Rinpoches or one of the Western-trained Retreat Lamas to begin the practice; and 2) a copy of the Ngondro sadhana, which you can also obtain from the Namse Bangdzo Bookstore.

Then, the Rinpoches or the retreat lamas can give you the next two things you need to begin: 1) the Reading Transmission (a permission-blessing in which the entire Ngondro Sadhana text is read to you to give you the blessing of the lineage, from the author of the sadhana up until now); and 2) the Practical Instructions on how to do the practice.

Many people ask if they need to have an empowerment to start the ngondro practice. There is no special “ngondro empowerment” needed to start the practice, although many people are recommended to get the Vajrasattva empowerment before they start the Purification Mantra practice, which is the second of the four ngondro practices.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche also recommends that once people begin doing ngondro, they should try to get the Bodhisattva Vow from a qualified Kagyu master whenever they can. It’s OK to start ngondro without taking the bodhisattva vow, but it’s great to have it as soon as possible, to strengthen your bodhisattva commitment, which will help the practice grow for you.

If you have any further questions, you may contact me by e-mail or phone. My prayers and best wishes are with you!

