



# Study, Contemplation, and Meditation

H.H. the 42<sup>nd</sup> Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche



"The Sakya Tradition" Publications



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Published by “The Sakya Tradition”

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# Acknowledgement

His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, bestowed this teaching on June 24, 2019, at Sakya Phuntsok Ling in Silver Spring, Maryland. In 2020, this English transcript was prepared, edited, and published by The Sakya Tradition, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and making widely available the precious Dharma teachings of the glorious Sakya lineage. The text was translated into the Chinese language by The Sakya Tradition translation team. We thank everyone who has contributed one way or another in making this teaching available, connecting many to the precious Dharma in order to obtain temporary and ultimate benefits.

By the merit of this work, may Their Holinesses the Sakya Trichen and Sakya Trizin enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

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## A Good Motivation

**W**e should have the right reasons for whatever we do. Similarly, when we study Dharma, we should have good objectives. Each person's reason for studying Dharma might be different.

Some study just out of curiosity. But if so, then it is not a right reason because it means you just want to gain knowledge and have no intention to practice. Then you do not want to put your knowledge into action. Just gaining knowledge or having an intellectual understanding is not enough. Gaining knowledge is the first step but it is not complete. For example, someone may learn about driving a car and pass a written exam, but just having an intellectual or theoretical understanding of how to drive is not enough. Having learned about driving, you must put it into practice. This means you must practice how to drive and pass the driving test. Likewise, as to Dharma, knowledge without practice is not so beneficial.

If we learn Dharma just to gain knowledge or receive high marks in exams, this is not a good motivation. Also, if we learn Dharma with the idea that we can teach many followers in the

future, this motivation appears good. But it is not a genuine reason because we do not study Dharma just to teach it. By teaching, one can spread Buddha's message and give others a chance to understand Buddha's precious and profound teachings. But for the teacher, the possibility of teaching even many students is not the right reason to study Dharma.

So, you should not study Dharma merely out of curiosity, simply to do well in school or on an exam, or just to teach others. If these are our ultimate aims, then our Dharma study is just for the purpose of this life, which is not right. The great Arya Mañjuśrī gave the pith instruction called *Parting from the Four Attachments* to Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, the main or first guru among Sakya's five founding masters. The first line says: "If you have attachment to this life, you are not a Dharmic person." Even if you can give teachings to many people, if you are performing this activity simply for this life, still you are not a spiritual person within the meaning of Buddha Dharma.

So, we should have genuine reasons for studying Dharma. If our intention is not right and we study with worldly intentions, then sometimes studying will not reduce our negative thoughts—but might cause them to increase. Because after gaining knowledge, we might feel proud and arrogant, disrespecting those who have none or little knowledge of Dharma. Also, we might feel unhappy about those who know more or are better educated than us, giving rise to jealousy. And as to those who are at a similar level as us, we may generate competitive thoughts. All these



negative thoughts arise not because of studying Dharma, but because the person studying Dharma has the wrong intention.

Therefore, how we study matters just as much as what we study. It is important to study with the right intention, proper respect, and sincere devotion. If we study Dharma just for ourselves or just for the sake of one monastery or one community, then it is not right. Because whatever subject we study, we must study for the sake of all sentient beings without exception. As a Mahāyāna Buddhist, whenever we study, we should have renunciation, infinite loving-kindness and compassion, and bodhicitta. And for Vajrayāna Buddhists, we should keep in mind that Vajrayāna is inseparable from Mahāyāna. In fact, Mahāyāna has two parts—Pāramitāyāna and Vajrayāna. Nowadays, some might think that Mahāyāna refers to only Pāramitāyāna, but actually Mahāyāna encompasses both Pāramitāyāna and Vajrayāna.

## Have Great Respect

**W**hen we study Dharma, we should have great respect for the subject. We should not think that Dharma is an ordinary subject. Dharma is different from other subjects like language, math, or geography. Studying these other subjects can benefit us in our present life, but they cannot help us to gain a favorable rebirth in our next life or attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

For these reasons, when studying Dharma, we should have great respect, but it does not mean we should have respect without analysis. First, we must examine Dharma. Buddha said that we must examine his teachings before accepting them. As Buddha explained, when we buy gold, we first must check whether it is genuine gold by burning, cutting, and rubbing it. After examining it thoroughly, then we can feel convinced that it is genuine gold. Once we have this conviction, then we will buy it. So, Buddha said that we should not accept his teachings without reasoning or analysis. And the more we examine Dharma, the deeper understanding we will gain.

Dharma is a profound and holy subject because Dharma is the true source of happiness. It can remove our suffering and its causes. Dharma can subdue, improve, and have a great impact on our wild mind. All Buddha's teachings can be said to be mind-training teachings and methods to tame our mind, directly or indirectly. Dharma is the source of all happiness because it is the direct antidote that eliminates our negative thoughts.

Moreover, Dharma is the method that helps us develop good qualities; our good qualities like loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta are none other than Buddha Dharma. The real Buddha Dharma is not just Dharma books or sounds. Rather, it is our own realization and experience. That is what can really subdue our mind. We can gain inner realization and experience by studying Dharma texts and teachings from a genuine teacher with the right motivation.

When studying Dharma, we also must respect the teacher. Since Dharma is superior to worldly subjects, we should perceive our Dharma teacher as superior to teachers of worldly subjects. In his treatise *Differentiation of the Three Vows*, Sakya Pandita explained that we should regard our Pāramitāyāna teacher as like a buddha. Once we make this dharmic connection as teacher and student, then we should never criticize our teacher. If we do, then we cannot attain genuine realization or experience, even if we study.

Even after learning Dharma, sometimes an individual still

might not change their habits or might continue to behave like a worldly person. Or we might think, this individual's habits and attitudes have become even worse! If we see this, we must clearly understand that this individual did not become worse due to studying Dharma. Rather, this happened because the individual failed to apply Dharma knowledge to their actions or failed to materialize the teachings in their daily life. For this reason, an individual might still have jealousy, competitive thoughts, disrespect to those with lesser Dharma knowledge, and other negative emotions. And sometimes, out of their own pride or arrogance, this type of person might even criticize Buddha or great followers of Buddha like Nāgārjuna or Candrakīrti—or try to prove them wrong. We should understand that this individual went astray. We cannot actually prove Buddha or these great masters wrong. I am not saying this because I am Buddhist. But if we investigate Buddha's teachings thoroughly without taking any sides or without bias, we will understand that his teachings are truly about the reality of phenomena. Therefore, it is important to respect Buddha as well as the great authors of philosophical texts and other teachings.

## The Actual Meaning of the Teachings

**T**o recap, we study Dharma for the sake of all beings. We also should not study only for this life or the next life. Moreover, we must study the authentic Dharma. If we meet a wrong teacher or wrong teaching, then it is not right. So, we must find an authentic teacher and authentic teachings. Currently, in this degenerate time, we might see or hear about false teachers giving false teachings. Thus, it is important to be careful.

When studying Dharma, we should reflect that we are so fortunate to have the opportunity to study precious and profound teachings. In ancient times, some people made significant efforts or endured many hardships just to hear four lines of teaching. So, we should feel fortunate to receive so many teachings directly from the teacher or online.

We should study Dharma not out of obligation, but with great joy. If we are forced to study by our teachers, parents, relatives, or others, then it is not right. In some cases, although we are not forced by others directly, still we might feel like we are forced. For example, if we must take an exam at the end of a course,

even if others have not pressured us, we might feel pressured. As such, we force ourselves to study. If we are studying under pressure, then our intention might be for short term—to do well on the exam. But then, after the exam, we tend to easily forget what we had learned because the intention was not right—it was just for a short-term goal.

We should study not just to have an intellectual understanding. But we should feel the meaning of the teachings in ourselves. Also, we should apply different examples that have the same meaning of the teaching we are studying. A teaching may give one example, but to deepen our understanding, we should use different examples or even our own examples that have the same meaning. By studying like this, we will deepen our understanding, and it will be easier for us to remember the teaching.

We also should study the actual meaning, not just how to explain a teaching to others. If we study about how to explain teachings or certain verses to others, then we will focus our time and energy on the literal meaning rather than the actual meaning. We might be able to explain a teaching's literal meaning extensively, but still we do not know the actual meaning. So, studying the actual meaning is more important than focusing our studies on the literal meaning.

The words in Dharma teachings are generally classified as having either interpretative or definitive meaning. When the words do not show us the literal meaning, or the meaning is deeper than the words alone, they are of interpretative meaning. Rather than

focusing on the literal meaning, we should strive to understand the actual meaning. For example, the phrase “the yoga of the directions and the moon” does not literally mean the yoga of particular directions like the east and so on. Rather, these words have an interpretive, not a definitive, meaning. The phrase “the yoga of the directions and the moon” refers to the eleven yogas or practices associated with certain teachings. They are called as such because there are ten directions and only one moon we can see in the sky. So, the word *directions* refers to the number ten and *moon* refers to the number one, hence meaning the eleven yogas. Since this phrase has an interpretative meaning, we cannot understand it by its literal meaning alone. But then in some teachings, when it is said that there are four noble truths taught by Buddha, this statement has a definitive meaning because there are four noble truths—not a different number.

When we study Dharma, we also should ascertain whether the teaching is about the relative or ultimate truth. And we must not mix them. We should study these separately because these two truths have different explanations. Otherwise, we might get confused. For example, some teachings say there is existence, but others say there is no existence. So, we should ascertain whether a teaching is according to the relative or ultimate truth.

In addition, we need to cultivate faith in and devotion to the teacher and teachings. After careful examination, we should develop devotion. Because Buddha Dharma is very important, when we accept someone as our Dharma teacher, it is a big decision.

We should not accept just anyone as our Dharma teacher. We must first examine the teacher. Only after thorough examination and knowing that someone is qualified should we accept that person as our teacher. We would not buy a house without investigation; we first try to check its location, price, condition, and so on. We would do our own inspection before deciding to buy a house. This house might be used for several decades, but not more than that. A house is used only for this life. But once we have made a dharmic connection with a teacher, that teacher will remain our teacher not only for this life. We should always show respect and pray “may this teacher be our teacher life after life.” So, it is important to choose a Dharma teacher carefully. We should examine a teacher more carefully than a house we are considering buying.

Once we have a clear understanding of these points, then we should engage in proper study with great devotion, right motivation, and great joy. To study Dharma, we need diligence, good understanding, and intelligence. If we have all these qualities, then it is certain we can gain knowledge. But as discussed already, knowledgeable persons sometimes might have pride and arrogance. For this reason, when we gain knowledge, we must control our negative thoughts. It is crucial to be vigilant and conscientious all the time, so our minds are not swayed by negative thoughts.



## The General Structure

**W**hen studying Dharma, we should have the right motivation. After studying, we should contemplate the teachings. Study and contemplation are important. Together, they can broaden our mind, enabling us to gain more knowledge, more understanding, and greater wisdom. It is like moving from a small pond to a big ocean; our wisdom and knowledge becomes greater. After studying and contemplating the teachings with the right motivation, then we meditate. It is said that meditation without studying is like a handicapped person climbing a rocky mountain, which usually they cannot do. Similarly, we cannot meditate without having intellectual understanding or without proper study and contemplation.

At the same time, we must maintain moral conduct and good discipline. Even in worldly life, a person might excel in certain activities, but if that person lacks discipline or good behavior, then they are not regarded as a good person or cannot find a good job due to their bad habits or short-temper. Similarly, one might have Dharma knowledge, but without moral conduct and discipline,

one is not a good spiritual person. Knowledge is not everything; we also need to have moral conduct. In the *Abhidharmakośa*, the great Indian master Vasubandhu said that upon a base of moral conduct, we should study, contemplate, and meditate.

This general structure can be applied to all Buddhist schools—whether Theravāda, Mahāyāna, or Vajrayāna. We should follow this structure and order, starting with moral conduct, then engage in study, contemplation, and meditation. We also must check our motivation constantly. Sometimes, after studying Dharma for many years, without checking one’s motivation, one might think, “I have done so many great things in this life.” One might think so highly of oneself. But, if someone has not developed the right motivation, then that person is not a spiritual person according to the Buddha Dharma. Rather, that person is engaged in study and practice with attachment to this life. That is contrary to the first line of *Parting from the Four Attachments*, as I explained before. Therefore, we must study authentic Dharma teachings with the right motivation from an authentic teacher, with genuine respect and moral conduct. If we have all these causes and conditions, then there is no doubt that we will become a good spiritual practitioner.

After years of Dharma study, someone might think that if they do not have the chance to teach, then there is no chance to use their Dharma knowledge. But Dharma knowledge is not gained merely to teach others. The main point is to practice and subdue our mind. Even if one does not have the chance to teach,

then still one can use one's knowledge to practice. If someone teaches Dharma repeatedly, but does not practice and lacks experience or realization, then this activity will not benefit oneself in a great way. Thus, it is important to first practice Dharma and experience; then, one may teach others. As to those great teachers who teach through their experience and realization—while I am not of this category—their teachings are more profound than teachings from those who lack practice or realization. If one teaches based on mere intellectual understanding, one's teachings will not be profound like those of realized teachers.

It is important to teach according to the listeners' capacity. If one gives a teaching without checking the listeners' capacity, then it is not right. For example, if the listeners have the capacity to receive a teaching for just a certain period, yet the teacher teaches for a longer time, then the teaching is beyond the listeners' capacity. The listeners then cannot comprehend such a long teaching. So, for each teaching given, the teacher must teach according to the listeners' capacity.

This concludes my teaching. We dedicate the merit to attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. Also, we dedicate all our merit for our root gurus—His Holiness the 41st Kyabgon Gongma Trichen Rinpoche, His Eminence Luding Khenchen Rinpoche, and others—for their good health, for their long lives, and to turn the wheel of Dharma always.

## Questions and Answers

As a supplement, below are His Holiness's answers to questions in July 2020.

**Question:** Regarding the point that we should regard our Pāramitāyāna teacher as like a buddha, how do we bring this view into our daily life and practice? How does this view differ in Vajrayāna?

**Answer:** In the Pāramitāyāna tradition, the Dharma teacher should be perceived as like a buddha. So, in our daily life, we should respect our Dharma teacher not just through our physical actions and speech, but also through our mental actions. Generally, we should respect any teacher. But as to our Dharma teacher, through our physical actions and speech, we should respect that teacher more than an ordinary teacher. And mentally, we should perceive our Dharma teacher as like a buddha. Having this view helps us to have more respect and to not generate negative thoughts. Also, it helps us develop some level of pure perception.

In Vajrayāna though, we regard our guru, who has given us a major

empowerment, as a real buddha—that is, as the combination of all the Buddhas, Dharma, and Sangha. Hence, we say that taking refuge in the guru is like taking refuge in the Triple Gem, because the guru is the combination of the Triple Gem or all objects of refuge.

\* \* \*

**Question:** Regarding the point that we should not criticize the teacher, what does this mean when a student observes that a teacher’s instruction or behavior does not accord with Buddha Dharma?

**Answer:** If a teacher does something wrong or something that is not in accord with Buddha Dharma, but the teacher has otherwise given us great and genuine Dharma teachings, we should feel grateful for the part of the teacher’s activities that involved bestowing Dharma teachings and acting as a messenger or a bridge between Buddha and ourselves. But as to a wrong action, we should leave that part in equanimity.

It depends on the individual’s perception. In some cases, a teacher may say something or instruct a disciple to do something to purify the disciple’s obscurations or negative deeds. For example, Marpa asked Milarepa to build a tower and destroy it—again and again. From Marpa’s side, he did not need this to be done for his own sake. But to purify Milarepa’s prior misdeeds and to cause him to generate devotion, Marpa directed Milarepa to repeatedly build and destroy the tower. It depends on the

individual, however. If we cannot see that what the teacher does or asks of us is in accord with Buddha Dharma, and if there's no other genuine purpose that we can discern, then we do not need to follow. But at the same time, we need not criticize, blame, or find fault.

-The End-





■ His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



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