

## How To Become A Good Practitioner

- Our Sangha recently had the pleasure of receiving a glorious teaching from Tulku Yeshe Rinpoche entitled, "**How to become a good practitioner.**" Rinpoche began his lecture with the following words:
- In many ways, you know more than me. Because there are so many books about Tibetan Buddhism that are written in English, you have had the opportunity to read from many masters from many different schools. You can read teachings from Thai, Chinese and Zen Buddhism books as well as from the Indian and Tibetan Masters.
- Yet, I have received many teachings from lots of Tibetan Masters, many of them being realized Masters. It is hard to really know who is on the path or who is realized. However, from my side, I respect them as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. For me, they are very important spiritual teachers, the most important beings in my life. More than my parents, or the same as my parents.
- This means that we are like 50/50. You know more than me in one way, by being able to read so much information on the Buddhadharm. Then, I know more than you in another way that I can share with you. That is why I am here today to sit down and give this talk, to be able to pass down to you the teachings that I have received over many years. I have tried very hard to learn English to be able to communicate with you in the best way possible, to save the time that it takes to translate.
- Today's topic is, "How to become a good practitioner." However, I think that this really means, how to become a BETTER practitioner. Many of you I know are good practitioners in many ways and want to practice continually, in this life and on to future lives. Your goal is to become an Enlightened One or Bodhisattva. We practice Tibetan Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, so we have to learn what the instructions are from the lineage teachers that give the Mahayana or Vajrayana teachings. For this reason, about a year ago I realized that we needed a good text that compiled together the instructions from our lineage masters. We need to pay attention to small, yet very important books like this. This is what "**Handbook For Half Buddhas**" is about. I tell my students, if this book makes sense to you, then Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism can help you with your practice. If not, you should study more before you practice Tibetan Buddhism.
- I have noticed that in the West, many students have such a strong idea of what they do and do not want to practice that they lose sight of paying attention to instructions. For example, saying that they only want to practice Dzogchen or that

they don't want to do Guru Yoga. This kind of thinking makes your practice broken. That is like having a body without a head, it makes no sense and is not useful. Guru Yoga is the head of the practice, or the eyes, or the heart. So, if you want to practice Mahayana Buddhism, you need to practice these things- How to generate love and compassion for all beings and strong devotion in Guru, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. *If you want to practice Vajrayana Buddhism, you have to have three things. 1. Strong devotion in Guru, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. 2. Pure vision of all phenomena. 3. Great compassion for all sentient beings. You need all three of these things to be able to succeed. You can ask yourself, do I have these things? It's very simple, yes or no. In order to have the pure vision, each time you see the form, you should be seeing all beings as Dakas and Dakinis. Each time when you hear the noise, voice or sound, you should be visualizing the tantric mantra song. Each time when you have thoughts, the thoughts should become rigpa, awareness., primordial wisdom. These three things make you a tantric practitioner.*

- The next thing that you should ask yourself is, *“Do I know what my samayas are and do I keep them?”* Things that you should do and things that you should avoid; your Vows. There are 14 Tantric Root Downfalls. Ask yourself, *“Do I know all of them?”* Yes or no. Some of you have been practicing for years but may not be a Buddhist. *How do you become a Buddhist?* Maybe you know, maybe you do not know. If someone asks you, you should say this: **1.** Take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha from the bottom of your heart; never changing your devotion. **2.** Keep your Refuge Vows. Ask yourself if you know these or not. Yes or no. Next is knowing if you're a Mahayana practitioner or not. *What makes you a Mahayana practitioner?* Of course, the Bodhisattva Vows. Ask yourself, *“Did I take Bodhisattva vows from anyone?”* Yes or no. *“What is the most important vow to take care of?”* Love and compassion for all sentient beings, forever. This is the Bodhisattva Vow. Yes, we are ordinary people, so sometimes we get angry or sad. That's one thing. Something totally different is holding onto that anger, keeping the feeling with you. That is the number one enemy for breaking the Bodhisattva vow. You can see when people continue to be upset with a partner after a divorce or a former boss and so on. This is different than the temporary anger. Lama Atisa said, *“I have anger, but I don't keep the anger.”* It comes and goes, that is all. This is very important. Keeping anger in your heart is totally against your compassion. You should forgive this person. Or try to forget, then slowly begin to forgive this person over time. Not only is holding the anger in your heart bad for your practice, it is also bad for your health. It is like cancer for your mind. You should cut the cancer out and throw it away. Left there, it will kill your Bodhicitta, your great compassion and love. Then, you need to make sure that you have strong devotion, the correct motivation. Each time thinking, *“I'm going to practice this so that all mother sentient beings can reach Enlightenment.”* This is also *Bodhicitta*.

- Also, there is *relative Bodhicitta* and *ultimate Bodhicitta*. The relative Bodhicitta is that great compassion and love. The absolute, or ultimate Bodhicitta is understanding that the nature of all phenomena is emptiness. The nature of mind is always pure. Our negative emotions surround the nature of the mind like clouds cover the moon or sun. Yet, the nature of mind remains pure and calm. We have the experience to support this if we really examine carefully. Our mind doesn't want to get angry, it gets you to try and calm down. When you are able to be calm, the mind is very happy. This means that mind itself likes stable, joyful peace. When you look at our bodies, you can see the same thing. Mostly our bodies say, just relax. If you run away and exert yourself with a lot of strength, your body will begin to force you to take rest, it is too much. Your body, speech and mind are all aligned in this same way. If you talk continually for an hour, you will notice yourself getting tired, you need to calm down. The more you remain in a calm state, this is pleasing to your mind.
- Because we are beginners, we need the *renunciation*. Renunciation is the antidote to attachment. This is because we trust our temporary health, wealth and reputations. We think, "Oh, this is real.. I'm a healthy, young person. I have some money, I am okay, I don't need to practice." We attach to these temporary things, not thinking about the next step which is change. We don't think about or remember this and that is a big mistake. That's why when something happens suddenly, people become crazy. If you already remind yourself that things are changeable, that this is the nature of this phenomena, then one day when it changes, you are okay. Especially death. We know that we are going to die one day, but mostly we don't want to think about this. Good practitioners must think about death at least nine times each day. Having these kinds of thoughts make you live your life in a simple way. You realize what is important and don't look for crazy things to make you feel better. The more simple things are means to less stress. If you have 60 pairs of shoes, you have 60 attachments. If you have 1 million dollars, you have 1 million attachments. People tend to do the opposite, wanting huge amounts of things and a simple mind. That does not make sense and does not work. That is like keeping a huge pile of garbage in your room and wanting a nice smell. This is impossible.
- Lama Tsongkhapa said in the Lam Rim, "It is not enough if the Dharma is in the Mahayana Dharma. The person should BECOME a Mahayana practitioner, then it works." If there is balance, it works. Mostly we see people looking for Dzogchen or very high types of Dharma teachings, but our mind is very low. It never works like that. Your mind should match the practice, then it works. You should become a real Buddhist, a real Mahayana practitioner, real Vajrayana practitioner, from you. Then it works. Otherwise, it is like when little children try to put on their parents' shoes and walk; it doesn't work.

- So, a good practitioner doesn't necessarily mean someone who has been practicing Buddhism for many years or who has a lot of teachers or who knows lots of Dharma. *Even if you know only one thing but your mind and this Dharma become one, that's all.* Now you have become a good practitioner. Many things you can learn from your teacher, physical things where you can make a copy of what they are doing. This is the outer exercise; without the soul coming together with what you are doing, you cannot complete the inner exercise. Without the strong devotion and compassion behind what you are doing, it doesn't truly work. All the time in Tantric texts, if it is just one page or a whole book, it talks about Refuge with strong devotion in the Guru, Yidam and Dakinis, the Three Roots. Then, after the end of the texts, there is always the Dedicaton of Merit. This shows the Bodhicitta that you need. So, if you have this kind of strong devotion in the Guru, Yidam and Dakinis, very strong compassion and love for all mother sentient beings, then at that moment you become the great Mahayana practitioner.
- Going back to Refuge, there are *Three Doors of Buddhism*. The door of Refuge, the door of Bodhicitta and the door of Vajrayana. For the door of Refuge, after you took the Refuge Vow in Buddha is to *respect the Buddha*. We must respect the images or statues that we see as Buddha. When next to your statue or Thangka, you should be careful, because this Buddha knows whatever you are thinking. If you read the book, "The Bodhisattva's Way Of Life", it says that "The Buddhas can always see you. " Knowing this, you should look at your mind, be mindful. Don't create negative thoughts, especially about harming others: always think about the Lord Buddha's blessing, which is always on the crown of your head. With all of the Tantric deities; Guru Rinpoche, Vajrayogini, Green Tara, White Tara, Chenrezi, Manjushri. Visualize all of them on the crown of your head. Yes, they are there if you have strong devotion. They do not have a physical body like we do. They have rainbow bodies and billions of emanations, so always, they are there. Guru Rinpoche says, "If you have strong devotion in me, I will lay down inside your door. " So visualize all of the Buddhas on the crown of your head with a warm feeling. "My Guru, Buddha and Dharma, all of them are here."
- Secondly, the Dharma. After you take refuge in the Dharma, *respect the Dharma*. No matter if it's Hinayana, Vajrayana, Mahayana, and from Tibetan Buddhism no matter if it is Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, you should respect equally. Otherwise, you have broken the refuge vow from the Dharma. Equally, no matter Tsongkhapa Lama text, Longchenpa's text , you should respect totally the same. Of course, it is okay to have your own favorite, that is different than respect. I remember 26 years ago in Tibet, a friend of mine had something happen like this. He was Gelupa and he had one Tsongkhapa Lam Rim and stayed in a hotel with many people. In Tibet and China, a couple people can stay in one room with 4 beds. He said, when he arrived , there were two Nyingma nuns and one table in the hotel room. He put the Tsongkhapa's

Lam Rim there and went to lunch or dinner. After he came back, the book was gone. Then, he saw the book in the corner with the shoes. When he asked the nuns, they said, "Oh, that is Tsongkhapa's text, we don't like." Look. Is Guru Rinpoche like that? No. Never ever. This is the opposite of the teachings. We should respect each other's Dharma. Then, the materials. Now, many of the Dharma materials come in forms like books, CDs, magazines and images in your cellphone. Many times, people forget how to respect these things. Even practitioners that have been practicing for up to almost 40 years do things like walking over the Dharma books. Never walk over or on top of Dharma materials. Think first about where you will place your cellphone; if in pocket, upper front pocket and don't place it on the cushion. Try your best to not bring these things into the bathroom, including your mala. Same thing about your vajra or bell. If you look at these things like ordinary materials, that is not right. Vajra represents all of the Father Tantras, the Deities from Father Tantra. The bell represents all Deities from Mother Tantra. Lastly, sometimes I see Practitioners touch their fingers to their tongue to help turn the page on a text. This is very disrespectful, please don't do this ever. When Lama Atisa came to Tibet, he mostly gave the Mahayana teachings, not Vajrayana. He was a very careful teacher. Many of the Nyingmapa Tibetan yogis didn't respect him, saying he was just a yellow monk who only talked about things like Refuge, Karma and Bodhicitta. One of these yogis didn't really respect Atisa, but he wanted to listen to what he said. He may have been looking for Atisa's mistakes. During the teaching, Atisa saw someone turn the page in this way and corrected him. This yogi noticed this happen and was touched, knowing that Atisa really respected the Buddhist texts amazingly. Since then, the Nyingmapa became his student. Also, when I read the book, "A Saint in Seattle", I saw that each time Dezhung Rinpoche gave a Dharma teaching, before he opened the Dharma books, he washed his hands. This is so very important. Look how often we always wash our hands for our own health after using the bathroom; for self-cherishing. For Dharma things, we don't care. We also see people choose certain practices like maybe Medicine Buddha, Green Tara to become a healthy person. We need to make sure that we are having the correct motivation behind what we are doing. Otherwise, we are misunderstanding the great potential benefit that is offered by Tantric practice. Remember that practicing Mahayana Buddhism is the antidote to self-cherishing.

- Self-cherishing takes you away from being a good practitioner. Self-cherishing brings along with it things like jealousy, anger and gossip. In a good functioning Monastery or Dharma center, the absence of self-cherishing brings success. Without these negative things, there is room for good energy and brings new people who are encouraged to grow in their practice. You can have the most beautiful temple and statues, but if the Sangha is full of self-cherishing, the building feels funny and things are not productive. I always ask people to do their best to respect each other and

cherish others' over themselves, keeping the pure vision. This is the ordinary person's problem. I have had this problem also. The best thing to do is to first recognize this; that you have the problem. Then, decide to do something about it. Finally, change your behavior every day. Little by little, each day, you can change what you do. It is not really easy, especially keeping the Tantric vows. It is extremely difficult. Even Atisa said, "I never have broken my Refuge vow. Sometimes I have broken my Bodhicitta. Immediately, I took out my mandala for confession when this happened. As for my Vajrayana vows, I have unknowingly broken many times." He is talking about the pure vision, visualizing each person as a Tantric Deity. So, becoming a Vajrayana practitioner is very difficult. Becoming a Buddhist practitioner is a little bit easier, and becoming a Mahayana practitioner is easier than becoming a Vajrayana practitioner.

- Now, hopefully you understand that how good of a practitioner you become depends on *how much you respect and keep the vows*. I think that this is similar to ordinary life as how good of a husband or wife or employee depends on how much you respect the rules. Our ordinary life and religious life can help each other.
- I know that a lot of you like to read very much. I'm not against education, but to read in place of experience ruins your wisdom. If you read too much, you cannot focus on your path. Choose your reading material wisely and then study it carefully. Dharma books are different from history books. Dharma books are like food that you should taste. You should take the words and use them to practice until you are realized - sentence by sentence. Read, then stop, close your eyes and meditate. Visualize with real feeling what you have read. Finally, you totally understand. That's why in Dzogchen, we have things like Thogal. You should experience the suffering of the six realms. Then, your visualization can be meaningful. About 25 years ago, I had one Gelupa Master, a Geshe. A very famous Master. He was very famous for his skills in debate, but for me it was something else that was the most important. When he practiced Dharma, he did so with experience. When he meditated on Lam Rim, he visualized the hot hell realm and burned himself with the incense. Then he asked himself, "Even this much fire brings suffering to you. If you go to hell realm, can you experience this?" In the winter in Tibet, he would go outside and practice for a couple of hours, almost dying. He did the same thing by starving himself and asking himself the same kind of question. "Can you really experience this?" No. So, the answer is to practice. These kinds of things are just a window into what the type of suffering is like for beings stuck in the lower realms for thousands of years. From his body, he experienced what it took to get to the real feeling behind why we practice. This is the type of effort that it takes to become a good practitioner. Maybe we don't need to do this physically, but we do need to find a way to get to that feeling. There's no guarantee of which realm we will go to. That is why we need renunciation, renunciation makes you a very strong practitioner.

- Keep your body, speech and mind free from non-virtuous actions, because of the karma. Remember that your protection is in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. If your practice is strong or not depends on your renunciation of Samsara.
- Enjoy your life, but always remember to wish that all beings can share and experience the same type of enjoyment.
- The real Mahayana Buddhist has to be able to have the same feeling for someone as a family member in a previous life as a family member that we are experiencing in this life. We must; there is no enemy. Sometimes I ask my friends, "If you are in the house and the King of Yama or a robber comes in and tells you that someone must die. What will you do? Say, kill me or my Mother? Or if someone should go to Heaven and someone to Hell Realm, what would your choice be? Mahayana practitioners should say without any doubt, "I should go to Hell Realm."
- I know that many times we get tired and it is difficult to practice. It is important to remember that your practice is connected with all Mother Sentient Beings. If you become a Bodhisattva, you can help countless beings. So, your every moment since you have received Bodhisattva Vows until you die is connected with all Mother Sentient Beings like this; its amazing. Every practice that you do is for the benefit of all like this, nothing is ordinary. So, we are very lucky that we have met such realized Masters, such wonderful Sangha members , and have received the Mahayana, Vajrayana teachings.
- *Now, what are we waiting for?* If you want to recite mantras, we have a mouth. If you want to do prostrations, we have a body. Really. What are you waiting for? So many people don't know what any mantras are. If you become a dog, yes you can bark, but are not able to do the things that the human body is able to. We have the precious human body that is priceless. This body can lead us to become a Buddha or Bodhisattva. Like my Mother, for example. Nomad Mothers are so busy with all kinds of work. She is always chanting all day long while she goes through each day, always.
- Lastly, something very important is *impermanence*. Don't get attached or stuck with things like temporary happiness or youth. Think about everything being impermanent. This doesn't mean that you cannot enjoy things but that you must remember that it is changeable. In the book, "Words Of My Perfect Teacher", it says that, " All the joyful and beautiful things from Samsara look like they cover the fire. So, we think that we are fine." Temporarily you are safe, yes, but under the beautiful things lies death and then your next life. Then, there is no guarantee where you will be born out of the six realms. Therefore, the best protector is the Three Jewels. *Buddha, Dharma and Sangha*. So, please enjoy your life, but enjoy it with renunciation. *Renunciation turns your mind towards the Dharma*.
- Our lives never go backwards. They are like a tree, growing taller and taller as the days go on. Then, the leaves get more and more beautiful. Finally, the color starts to

change and drain, finally the whole tree begins falling down. From *Dhammapada*, the Buddhist Bible, it says, “*Like the rain makes the leaves fall down, the age and sickness makes the life of the leaves fall down under the ground of death.*”

- Don't read many books. If you want to become a scholar, sure, go ahead. If you want to become a good practitioner, read very few books, choose them well and read them again and again until your mind becomes like that book.
- Please always remember to share your education, your wisdom in the right way. Try and help people calm down and avoid gossip, arguments or criticism. This includes online as well. If you want to write, say good things that help others. Encourage and inspire others with suggestions and sharing.
- *Use the 7 branch prayers* to help you have a strong Sangha. *Prostrations*: meaning respect each others; *Offerings*: meaning to help one another, ask each other what you can do to help, do things to make practice easier for one another; ask your Sangha members to help while you go on retreat; *Confession*: If you do something wrong, apologize; It is okay to use facebook or emailing to do this. On the other end, the person should forgive, accept the apology; *Rejoicing*: the antidote to being jealous of one another and also of gossip; *Requesting*: asking in order to be able to learn; *Supplication*: how we practice better, respect more, do retreat: *Dedication*: praying that we stay Sangha brothers and sisters until we reach Buddhahood, that you love each other; *Dedicating* the merit for my Guru's long life, that the Dharma increases everywhere, that my Sangha members meet again and again until we become Enlightened Ones. Seven branch prayers like this make you a good practitioner.

Transcribed by Yangchen Lhaze