

Lama Zopa Rinpoche: The Importance of Retreat

The Importance of Retreat by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Edited from the newsletter of Vajrapani Institute, November, 1992. (Vajrapani Institute, Box I, Boulder Creek CA 95006).

What is the importance of doing retreat? Why do people need to do retreat? It is not simply to be quiet, to have a break from one's family. Instead, there are very crucial reasons for doing retreat, very urgent reasons. One reason is happiness. The peace and happiness of parents, for example, depend upon their children's having affection and compassion towards them. And the children's peace and happiness depend upon their parents' affection and compassion. The same is true for couples or partners: each member's peace, happiness and success depend upon the compassion and kindness of the other person. For teachers and students as well, their peace and happiness depend upon one another.

On a larger scale, the relationship between the leader of a country and its population also depends upon their cultivation of a proper attitude, a good heart, compassion. If one person is to avoid bringing problems such as violence to a country or even to the whole world, that too depends upon his or her development of compassion, loving kindness and a good heart. For a person to obey a country's rules and regulations, to respect its laws and government, this also depends upon kind heartedness. If all people were to take care of their mind and develop a loving, compassionate attitude towards one another, they would naturally act with loving compassion. People would automatically stop harming each other and there would no longer be any need for rules and regulations to be set down, laid out and enforced. But as it is now, governments find it difficult to control problems. There are so many criminals these days that there is no place to put them all!

At this time, the peace and happiness of millions of people—of the whole world—can depend upon one person who has power, and he or she may have no loving-kindness or compassion whatsoever. Yet even a stranger in the street may show affection, a warm heart, loving-kindness and respect for another stranger, giving him or her much happiness. With such loving, compassionate thoughts combined with one's own kind and respectful actions, it is possible to bring happiness and peace to many people everyday, and even to non-human beings (animals, etc.).

But even if the message were already widespread that compassion and tolerance are greatly needed nowadays for both individuals and the peace of the world, this alone would not be sufficient. We have to know how to develop such qualities. The solution is found by entering into retreat, into a situation where it is possible to fulfill our basic human potential and develop all the positive qualities within ourselves. Retreat gives us the time and space to allow for the growth of this basic human quality. This is crucial and most urgent, a true emergency! Why? Because others' lives are in danger and so is our own.

Thus the first reason for doing retreat is to develop the basic human qualities of affection and loving-kindness; if we do not generate these qualities and express them towards others, we shall not receive the affection upon which our own happiness depends. The second reason retreat is important is that it gives us the time for putting the teachings we have received from our spiritual mentors into practice. The third reason relates to the busyness of our ordinary life: we are generally so caught up in hallucinations, sense enjoyments and our various obligations to others that retreat time is the only time we have to relax. In retreat we are free to think and have some quiet, peaceful time for ourselves, without distractions. In a retreat situation we have the opportunity to come face to face with ourselves, to see ourselves in depth, to meet ourselves.

Retreat helps draw your consciousness away from false projections and into reality. Only by recognizing the false projections that have been catching the mind and learning to distinguish between what is true and what is false is it possible to change our lives for the better. All such development of the mind comes from doing retreat. We become better human beings, better Dharma practitioners, better meditators. So retreat is the foundation of true development. Without retreat, without being alone, the mind is like muddy water. But the mind in retreat, being alone and free from outside distractions, is like a calm, crystal-clear lake. There is the clarity to help see ourselves more clearly and to see our Buddha nature more easily.

Now we can understand the importance, not merely for oneself but for all other beings, for organizing the facilities for doing a proper retreat. It gives us the opportunity of experiencing the varieties of happiness mentioned above, and this is without even talking about the many benefits of the actual spiritual practice itself. For example, by generating the thought of the altruistic intention, infinite positive potential is created, and by meditating upon emptiness for even one second, the heavy negative karma of the ten destructive actions is purified. As is mentioned in various sutras, even the intention to meditate upon emptiness—or merely having faith in the teachings about emptiness—can purify heavy karma. Even doing one prostration can create inconceivable positive potential. These beneficial results are difficult to comprehend with our ordinary mind.

There are many other examples of the immense benefit of Dharma practices. Reciting mantras and the names of holy beings even once can purify great negativities. For example, it is said that reciting the name of Shakyamuni Buddha can purify 84,000 eons of negative karma! Through their power of purification these and other practices can help bring the mind further along the path to enlightenment. Furthermore, meditating on the path to enlightenment also helps rid us of immediate dangers, such as rebirth in unfortunate life forms if death is imminent. At the same time, such meditational practice can purify the causes of this life's problems from difficult relations and unmanageable diseases such as cancer and AIDS to the danger of untimely death. Because we create great positive potential through these practices, they become the cause of success and harmony in this life, bringing good fortune in business, wealth, good health and long life. For all the above reasons, therefore, retreat gives us more hope, strength and encouragement for this life. And from a strong and healthy mind comes a strong and healthy body.

In conclusion, retreat is important because it involves retreating from ignorance, from the dissatisfied mind of attachment and from the self-centered attitude. These are the fundamental forces from which we must retreat; this is the true meaning of meditation. Transforming the mind into a positive state, freeing ourselves from unsatisfactory experiences and their causes—these are the essential purpose of Dharma practice.

There will always be problems and dissatisfaction as long as we think that the causes of happiness and the causes of suffering lie outside ourselves. But the experiences of our life—and the teachings of the Buddha—tell us that the source of happiness is within our own mind. We can find satisfaction, peace and happiness only within our own minds. Therefore, retreat and meditation practice become the ultimate solution for any and all of our problems.