



Teachings

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“A View of Confession: As Myth, as a Meditation, and as a Means of Moving On” — an edited excerpt from oral teachings given by Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, summer 2009

Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche presented teachings from the A-Tri dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Bon Buddhism during Ligmincha Institute’s 2009 Summer Retreat. In this excerpt Rinpoche explains the practice of confession (admitting your misdeeds), one of the practices that comprise the A-Tri Ngondro or preliminary practices.



If you are to engage in the practice of confession in a way that is natural, authentic, and therefore life changing, it must make sense to you personally. In the Tibetan spiritual traditions all forms of negative physical actions, negative speech, and negative thoughts are considered misdeeds, as are addictions like smoking and alcohol abuse. The role of confession is to help

you to transform and overcome these negative habits.

For example, we may have problems with anger and say hurtful things as a result. In order to change our habits and particularly to overcome our addictions, first we need to be conscious that these are misdeeds. Additionally, we must be conscious of them in a very immediate and direct way, more than intellectually. It is very important to be aware of our negative actions, speech, and thought. This does not mean feeling pressured to confess or else we will go to hell. If we feel pressured to confess our misdeeds when we are not truly aware of them, then that is not likely to do us much good. But becoming aware of our misdeeds is a good thing.

Take a look at all the positive changes that you've made in your life, when you were headed in the right direction of healing or of having a positive, healthy lifestyle. Most of those changes probably came about not because you felt bad or guilty, but because you became fully aware of what wasn't right. When you can become fully aware that one of your actions of body, speech, or mind is truly not right, there is strength in the authenticity of that awareness. And from that place of strength, you are able to make changes.

The point that I'm making here, especially for those who have some discomfort about the practice of confession, is that we need to clarify our view of confession. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with being aware of your misdeeds. That is the only way that you are going to be able to make some changes, right? But having the right kind of awareness is important. As you contemplate your misdeeds you might not feel so good, and that is okay when it helps to motivate you to change. But if contemplating them makes you feel depressed, then there is something subtly wrong with the way you are aware of them.

It is possible that you do not have enough support for making a change. It is important to know the antidotes to your negative emotions, to believe in the potential for healing, and to trust in the refuge tree. Clearly, when you have a real, true wish to change and you have the right supports, then when you face one of your misdeeds you will think to yourself, "Yes! I'm going to do it, I will make changes."

From a commonsense point of view, sometimes we don't seek help for addictions when we need it. We may think, "Why do I have to ask anybody? I know what I'm doing." Somehow, we are unwilling to turn to anybody for help. For sure, there is a very strong ego there. The ego is the one who developed that addiction in the first place, the ego is the one who successfully maintains it, and clearly the ego is the one who has the hardest time changing it. It is the ego,

too, who is the one who is not willing to ask for anyone's help when help is needed.

The inability to change often boils down to a lack of trust. It may be that you haven't changed a negative habit because you don't have a clear sense of trust in your ability, your potentiality, your inner power, your inner space, your inner awareness. Maybe you don't have enough trust in the refuge tree, or the sangha, the teacher, friends, or family. You can say, "Well, I consulted with my therapist, and I went to the retreat, and I even Googled it, and nothing helped me to overcome this problem." Many people think in this way. If that is the case for you, maybe it is not that you didn't look for a solution, but rather that you didn't trust. You are still in the place of doubt. If you could have had trust in even one of these supports, there might have been a true connection and something might have changed.

In the dharma, taking refuge begins with trust. And taking refuge—inviting the refuge tree as your witness—is the first of the four powers of confession. The second power of confession is to bring forth your misdeed and confess it. Then third, you naturally feel strong regret and remorse and make a vow not to repeat the misdeed. Fourth, you apply the antidote; for example, if you have acted in anger, then in your practice of confession you cultivate love, which is the antidote to anger. Each of these four points is essential to the confession practice.

Creating a place of refuge is not something that is done externally. Rather, you visualize the enlightened beings in front of you and bring them into your pure awareness. These images represent your inner truth and inner essence. The experience of refuge is very confidential and personal. Unless you truly feel this intimate connection, the visualization will not support you. Without enough support and trust in the enlightened beings and enlightened qualities, or in the sangha, friends, or family, then it can be very difficult to change no matter how much you think you want to.

After connecting with the experience of refuge, you must commit to change. If you don't make a firm commitment, such as "I will not do this for one week" or, "I will never do this again," you are likely to return rapidly to your negative habits. There will be nothing to prevent you from repeating your misdeeds. Just thinking "I don't want to do it anymore" is not strong enough.

Ask yourself: "What are the consequences if I don't change and the benefits if I do change?" Pay more attention to the results of your actions. Maybe you would not change for yourself, but you would change for others, for your partner, your family, your community, or the world. Maybe it is not always, "I need to change for me." Can you see how overcoming your anger can benefit

other people's lives? What are the negative consequences for those you love if you don't change? These may be good enough reasons to make a change.

The best way to approach confession is to lay out all your misdeeds in front of you and invite the refuge tree as your witness. The refuge tree is the outer manifestation of the clearest aspect of your self. It is your self. With this clear self-awareness of your misdeeds, you work with the four powers, and there is no way that you cannot purify your negative actions, negative speech, and negative thought. You can transform anything, purify anything.