



Teachings

‘Our Spiritual Life Supports’ – an edited excerpt from oral teachings given by Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, summer 2000

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I believe that everyone has experiences in connecting with the essence: with the base of all, the mind's empty, spacious nature that is the source of all enlightened qualities. For sure, everyone needs that connection and seeks that connection, even if there is no clear understanding of what one is needing and seeking. And at some time or another, everyone does experience a level of genuine connection with the essence in their day-to-day lives. For some people, this experience is very subtle and fleeting, for others it is deeper.

When one does connect, why does the experience not last? It is because there is no support for maintaining that state. All the meditation practices we are learning have to do with support for maintaining that connection. We are learning how to support the experience itself, and we also are learning methods for overcoming the external, internal, and secret obstacles to maintaining that experience.

As an example of an external obstacle to abiding in the essence, there may be someone in your life who for no apparent reason is angry with you. This person may just seem like a problem maker, someone who seems to always draw you away from your higher self. Other obstacles are internal: your own thoughts, obsessions, ideas. Some of those ideas, you know, are just crazy! What do you do about them? Sometimes you engage in an internal conversation with that craziness. Or sometimes you let it act out a bit, as if to say, “Okay, do what you want, I’m not paying attention.” You discuss, fight, and suffer with these thoughts. This is an example of

an internal obstacle.

Then there are secret obstacles: Maybe you are experiencing very little conflict, confusion, or physical distractions in your life, but at the same time not much is happening in your meditation practice. Internally there is no deep sense of wish to connect, and there is little sense that the enlightened qualities are ripening in you. You may be obscured by ignorance, dullness, laziness, or other subtle obscurations that may not be causing recognizable problems, but are preventing your practice from developing. Why are they called secret obstacles? They are secret because they don't seem like a problem. They are hidden.

We will continue to face obstacles like these all along the spiritual path. Therefore, our practice is about learning how to face them while also supporting our experiences of the essence. All the practices in the Tibetan Bon Buddhist tradition are about this.

Occasionally people can have very deep experiences of connection. I am not necessarily talking about people who have discovered the dharma, the spiritual teachings. You can have a very deep experience of the essence while on a wonderful camping trip, or while at a beautiful beach, hiking in the mountains, or dining with good friends. Nevertheless, when these experiences are not supported they quickly fade to nothing but a memory, a story from your past: "Oh, when I was a teenager, that wonderful thing happened." Clearly we lack enough support; therefore we lose these experiences. Just as a good vessel or container is the right support to hold liquid, a practice such as guru yoga or the ngondro can be a strong means of support for consistently holding the experience of the natural state.

Of course one can become extreme in one's attachment to the formalities of practice and lose connection to the essence that way, too. This is not to say that formality is not good; it does play a necessary role. But as you progress in your practice it is important not to be too attached to the formalities, otherwise your experience will be limited.

Lopon (Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche) has mentioned a few times this week that when you're crossing the river, you need the boat to get to the other side. Once you cross, though, then that's it — the boat is left behind. The point is to recognize the support offered by the form while not being too attached to the form. As we let go of form, our sense of devotion can remain to support the open awareness.

Let's talk for a moment not about the experience of the nature of mind, but about the experience of being well. At certain times in your life you feel just fine: You are active enough, resting enough, giving enough, and receiving enough. You feel gratitude. You feel like you have a full life, a good life. When you experience your life in this way, you know that the experience can be easily taken away unless what makes you feel well is continually supported. Without the support you need, that experience can disappear with one conversation, with just one piece of bad news. In an instant, one can feel lost. So we need support just to feel well in life.

Far more important is to have the right support for abiding in the nature of mind: for abiding in the state of *rigpa*, the luminous self-awareness of the mind. That is really what practice is all about. First it is important to recognize your obstacles to abiding, and then it is important to

recognize the supports for abiding. Finding a solution to support the practice can be a practice in itself, just as finding a job can be a job in itself. Trying to find balance can also be a big part of your practice — not being too attached to the form of practice, while not entirely letting go of the form when you need it, either.

In the end, every form is a doorway to the essence: It can serve as a reminder, and as a means, to connect to the essence. Without the right view, understanding, and method, though, you can get stuck in the form without realizing the essence. On the other hand, there are those who think, “I don’t need to recite the mantra, I don’t need to visualize, I don’t need these methods.” Either way, one will miss the connection.

One needs to understand the important balance between contemplative meditation and the practices that support it. Contemplation on the natural state is beautiful, and the supportive practices are also beautiful and needed.