

Ngöndro

The Tibetan term **Ngöndro** refers to the preliminary, preparatory, or foundational practices or disciplines (Sanskrit: *sādhana*) common to all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

The term *ngöndro* literally denotes meanings in the range of "something that goes before, something which precedes." The preliminary practices establish the foundation for the more advanced Vajrayana *sādhana* which are held to engender realization and the embodiment of Dzogchen.

Nevertheless, Vajrayana masters are careful to point out that "foundational" does not mean "lesser", that the practice of Ngöndro is a complete and sufficient practice of the spiritual path, and that it can take the practitioner all the way to full enlightenment.

In addition to what is generally denoted by the term *ngöndro*, preparatory practices, may also be prescribed for senior and advanced *sadhana* as the preparatory practice for "cutting through to primordial purity."

In general the preliminary practices are divided into two sections or kinds: the first are the common or ordinary kind of preliminary practices, and the second are the special or extraordinary kind of preliminaries.

Outer Preliminaries

The common or ordinary preliminaries consists of a series of deep reflections or contemplations on the following four topics:

1. the freedoms and advantages of precious human rebirth
2. the truth of impermanence and change
3. the workings of karma
4. the suffering of living beings within *samsara*

The above four contemplations are sometimes referred to as "the four reminders" or "the four mind-changers" or "the four thoughts which turn the mind towards Dharma."

Additional reflections may be included in the specific instructions on the outer preliminaries within different lineages, but the above four topics are the main reflections.

Inner Preliminaries

The special or extraordinary kind of preliminaries consist of :

1. taking of refuge in the three roots (that is, in the Three Jewels, also called the Three Treasures, Three Refuges, Precious Triad, or most commonly the Triple Gem) in conjunction with the performance of prostrations (purifying pride)
2. cultivation of *bodhicitta* (purifying jealousy). (In some formulations this is included under 1.)
3. recitations of Vajrasattva's hundred-syllable mantra (purifying hatred/aversion)
4. mandala offerings (purifying attachment)
5. guru yoga practices (purifying delusion)

These practices purify negative deeds and accumulate merit. Traditionally ngöndro practice is done for the enlightenment of the spiritual aspirant and for the benefit of all sentient beings. That is, the merit of doing the practices is dedicated to all sentient beings.

Ngöndro is an essential practice of all schools of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the indigenous Bön tradition. Each of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism—Gelug, Kagyu, Nyingma and Sakya—have variations as to the order of the preliminaries, the refuge trees visualized, the lineage gurus and deities invoked, prayers etc.

Despite these differences, all Ngöndro practices have as their goal the enlightenment of the practitioner so that he/she may be of the greatest benefit to all sentient beings, that is, the cultivation of *bodhicitta*.

While some novices may feel that the Ngöndro are somehow "lesser" than various tantric practices, they are a complete path to enlightenment in and of themselves. The renowned Lama Patrul Rinpoche (1808–1887) is said to have practiced the Longchen Nyingthig Ngöndro repeatedly throughout his life.

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