

VENERABLE
KHENCHEN THRANGU
RINPOCHE

COMMUNITY TALK

OJAI VALLEY DHARMA CENTER

Translated by Yeshe Gyamtso

Ojai, California
September 18, 1995

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I would like to welcome all of you this evening. I feel very fortunate to be visiting the Ojai Valley Dharma Center in order to bestow the abhisheka of Chakrasamvara upon some of the senior students here, and to have the opportunity to speak to you tonight about the significance and history of this center.

First of all, what I would like to talk about is the fact that each and every one of you who is associated with this center, whether you are long-standing students or new students, is very fortunate. Having the opportunity to work with a center such as this is extremely precious and, as such a precious opportunity, it should not be wasted. When I say that it's precious, I mean that the opportunity to practice genuine dharma is very, very precious. So please make use of the center and maintain a good connection with it and with one another so that the activities here cannot only continue but flourish and expand.

In countries in the West and especially in the United States of America, many teachers of dharma, many spiritual teachers, have appeared. Many have come here from other countries, Asian countries for example, and taught a variety of religious or spiritual traditions: non-Buddhist traditions such as Hinduism and other Asian religions, and a variety of Buddhist traditions such as the Zen tradition, the Theravadin tradition, the various traditions of the Buddhism of Tibet and so on. Just within the various traditions of the Buddhism of Tibet, the Kagyü, Nyingma, Sakya, and Gelug traditions, a large number of teachers have come here and taught in many ways. But among all of the teachers who have come to this country, there is one who I feel is supreme, because the teachings he presented, as well as the way in which he presented them, are the most profound, most beneficial to students and without doubt the most systematic, which is to say totally free from being haphazard. In short, I think the best teacher who ever came to this country was Trungpa Rinpoche, Chögyam Trungpa. This is something that, hopefully, all of you already know.

Trungpa Rinpoche was distinguished by the great love he had for all of his students and most especially by the great love he had for his American students. Because of his concern and commitment he taught in ways that communicated directly with the individual attitudes and individual lifestyles of the Americans and other Westerners with whom he dealt. In order to be able to do this most effectively, he totally fit his life and his lifestyle into the requirements of a teacher working in this culture. He married a Western woman, he adopted, as much as was possible, a completely Western lifestyle. He even drank the kind of liquor you like, sake and so on. [Laughter] In order to prepare himself to do this, he went to Oxford University [Laughter] where he studied Western culture. Through all this exertion on his part he was able to teach in a way that caused his students to genuinely enter into the buddhadharma.

By comparison, consider someone like myself. I come to the United States regularly, but I don't really fit in and I'm not capable of fitting in the way Trungpa Rinpoche did. For example, if you look at what I'm wearing, you'll see that I'm wearing clothing that by American standards is quite peculiar. And in fact, I would have to say that my brain, my mind, is not really

an American brain or mind. [Laughs; laughter] By contrast, Trungpa Rinpoche totally abandoned or relinquished any attitude of alienation from the culture in which he immersed himself. He adopted the lifestyle and, as appropriate, the attitudes and ways of behaving of this culture in order to be more effective as a teacher.

My point is that such an extraordinary teacher came to this continent and settled here. Not only did he settle here, but those of you who founded this center actually met him. Not only did you meet him, but you received instruction from him. And not only did you get this instruction, but you actually put it into practice. So your situation is one of the utmost good fortune.

Because of his effectiveness as a teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche came to have literally thousands of students. Foremost among these were those of you he trained as teachers, the ambassadors and so forth, many of whom are present here today. But among all of you, perhaps the most significant student he had was the person that he chose as the one person who would be instrumental in the full transfer of the vajrayana teachings from the Tibetan tradition to the American tradition that Trungpa Rinpoche was founding. And that was the person he empowered as his Vajra Regent.

When people study dharma, they sometimes become quite steeped in the terms and in the knowledge aspect - the words of dharma - and become a dharmic scholar. But often, scholars never put the meaning of what they know into practice and so become what we would have to call sophists. On the other hand, some people practice meditation but have no context for their practice. They don't really understand very much about dharma and become what we tend to refer to as dumb meditators. However, the situation that I described of what was passed down from Trungpa Rinpoche to the Vajra Regent is a situation that totally transcended either of those two defects or partialities, because both Trungpa Rinpoche and the Vajra Regent possessed and manifested all of the qualities of the genuine dharma. Because of this, the Vajra Regent was able to take his seat and empower and guide his own students. If you consider this, it is really amazing.

There are different styles of teaching found among the various gurus or spiritual friends who present the buddhadharma. Some adopt the strategy of trying to present the most profound instructions from the highest viewpoint from the very beginning. This often leads to the problem that the instructions and views that are presented are way beyond what the students can relate to and therefore don't really meet the students' needs. Because of that problem, some teachers, on the other hand, take the attitude that dharma has always to be kept at ground level. They limit their teaching to something that's very modest, very pragmatic, with a viewpoint that is low to the ground. And sometimes that doesn't benefit students either. One approach is too high and the other one is too low.

But Trungpa Rinpoche's presentation of dharma was totally unlike either of those approaches. He began with the clear and repeated injunction that dharma practice had to begin with the practice of shamatha or tranquility meditation. His instruction was not to practice a little bit of this, but to take this practice seriously and whole-heartedly. He instituted systematic programs and formats for doing this, such as the month-long retreat (dathun) and so on. He had students practice shamatha until they developed a state of tranquility within the mind and the ability to rest in stillness, until they developed a genuine experience of their own mind. The point of students doing this was to make their minds workable for other practices, to have a ground on which any subsequent form of practice could rest, a foundation on which to build.

Because Trungpa Rinpoche insisted on this foundation of shamatha practice, his students have consistently developed a stability of meditation practice superior to that of others.

The dharma taught by the Buddha consists of three activities: hearing or learning the dharma, contemplation or reflection upon what has been heard, and the practice of meditation based on the first two steps. For students to be able to do this in a systematic and complete way, Trungpa Rinpoche instituted the seminary programs, periods of three months during which he would teach. The teaching was done from the point of view of hearing (the first of the three steps), systematically divided into the three vehicles - the lesser vehicle or hinayana, the greater vehicle or mahayana and the vajra vehicle or vajrayana. He systematically presented the view of each vehicle sequentially, making sure that students were not only exposed to it, but that they actually understood it and digested it. It was presented in such a form that it would mix with their practice of meditation. On the basis of that study and understanding he would present, in the context of the seminary the uncommon special instruction, which is the actual pointing out instruction. Only after this was done would he have students begin the practice of the four uncommon preliminaries or ngöndro.

With regard to the uncommon or special instructions that Trungpa Rinpoche passed on to his students, the progenitor of our tradition in Tibet was known as Marpa the Translator. He was a Tibetan who went to India four times, engaging in great difficulties in order to get there. During his journeys to India he received a vast variety of instructions in the buddhadharma. He considered that the most profound, most effective, in short the best instruction he received was the cycle referred to as Chakrasamvara. This was principally what he spread in Tibet upon his return.

Following this, there arose in our tradition a large number of siddhas or attained masters. In fact, there have been many of these in every generation, up to and including the present. The practice, which led to this attainment, this siddhi or realization on the part of these practitioners, was the cycle of Chakrasamvara. The Chakrasamvara cycle is a complete system consisting of the generation stage (utpattikrama) and the completion stage (sampannakrama). In fact, it consists of both a complete system of generation and completion stages connected with the father, Chakrasamvara, and a parallel system of generation and completion stages connected with the mother, Vajrayogini. It was this system, which was perhaps the most effective thing ever to be transmitted to Tibet from India that Trungpa Rinpoche passed on to you.

There is an even further significance in Trungpa Rinpoche's transmission of the Chakrasamvara cycle to his students. As you know, Trungpa Rinpoche was the 11th in a line of emanations or incarnations called the Trungpa Tulkus. Starting with the first Trungpa Tulku, the particular dispensation or special lineage of the Trungpas was the teachings of Chakrasamvara. Because these teachings became the specialty of the Trungpa tradition, and because the manner of teaching and transmission of Chakrasamvara within that particular tradition was considered superior, therefore it was given the name Surmang Chakrasamvara or Surmang Demchog. It was this uncommon, superior tradition of Chakrasamvara that he passed on to his American students.

There have arisen many people who attained enlightenment, who attained siddhi, through practicing these instructions of Chakrasamvara. If you look at the history of this tradition, you'll see that in Tibet there were a variety of lifestyles that people adopted in order to facilitate this practice. In the case of many practitioners this involved a radical abandonment of a conventional lifestyle. This could mean either a monastic situation - a

monastic lifestyle and an abandonment of conventional mundane activities - or perhaps, even more radically, a form of yogic discipline in which a person would be beyond any kind of distracted activity except for meditation and the barest necessities.

Neither of these lifestyles, the monastic nor the radically yogic, are easy in the West, which is to say, neither of them are particularly appropriate for most practitioners. This meant that Trungpa Rinpoche needed to be able to teach people how they could practice these profound methods, these profound instructions, without wrecking their lives. He had to show people how to integrate such profound dharma with a proper fulfillment of their conventional responsibilities. Partly in answer to that particular need, he began to propagate his uncommon vision (uncommon meaning only he had terma based on his uncommon experiences, uncommon wisdom: the teachings of Shambhala.

All these instructions are worth so much are of such importance and value, that one could say they are like a jewel or a massive chunk of gold. They are like something which one treasures above all else. In fact, the similes of a jewel and gold are painfully inadequate. The point is, these instructions must not be wasted. It's necessary that the people who received them practice them and make use of them because only by doing so will it be possible to hand them on. And only if they are handed on will they be available to people in the future.

Naropa, the teacher of Marpa the Translator, made a prediction about the lineage which Marpa was to found. He said that just as a lion cub outgrows and becomes stronger than its mother, the students of this lineage will come to surpass their teachers. Of course, this statement requires examination. What does it actually mean? It means that when a teacher, a guru, gives his students instructions and the students put them into practice so that experience and instructions mix inseparably, not only are the students benefited but the lineage of instructions are actually enriched by the experience of each generation. Therefore, in a sense the teachings become more and more profound all the time. Such teachings of utmost profundity are what you have received.

In connection with this there is one point of particular significance here. The instructions which Trungpa Rinpoche passed on to his American students had, up to that time, only been transmitted in Asian countries - India and Tibet and so on. He passed these on to the Vajra Regent who was an American. Through the Vajra Regent's experience of these instructions, they became American. They became joined with the particular experience that only an American can have, the particular context of this situation. In that sense, not only did the instructions which the Vajra Regent passed on, that you received, have the full profundity of the original instructions, but they were enriched by his own particular experience of practicing these in the unique context of present-day America. Therefore, in my opinion, the instructions which he passed on to you were especially distinguished in their effectiveness and profundity by means of their being enriched by his experience as a practitioner from your culture.

Since these instructions are of such profundity and embraced by or filled with such practical experience, it is of the utmost necessity that they not be lost. What do I mean by lost? First of all, the words of the Vajra Regent's teachings must not be lost. This means his books, all the transcripts, and all the tapes of all the teachings he ever gave - all of these - must be kept. But that in itself is not enough. They have to be put into practice constantly, all the time. The experience of these teachings has to be maintained. If these are teachings are particularly beneficial to Americans because they come from the wisdom and experience of an American lineage holder, then they have to be continually maintained by American practitioners. They

have to be put to the test by each generation to see and to bring out the benefit which lies within them.

Who benefits from such maintenance of these instructions, this tradition? Primarily the people who are practicing, the people who are doing the job of maintaining these instructions through actually putting them into practice. But this is not something that is merely designed to benefit the present generation of practitioners. It's not that these instructions should be put into use by you and then forgotten. It's not that they should disappear and become a subject for history or archeology like ancient Greek civilization or something like that. These instructions have to be passed down from you to your children and from them to their children and so on. They have to go on.

Whose responsibility is this? Well, obviously it's yours because you're alive right now. So that the instructions of this tradition are maintained for the future, the activity of this center is so vital because to pass these teachings down completely from one generation to another there has to be the cooperation and work of a group of individuals. Otherwise some things will survive and other things won't. And that's simply not good enough. It's not good enough if half of the Vajra Regent's teachings make it to the next generation or if one-third of them make it to the next generation. Then each generation will only have one-third of what the last generation had. Allowing that type of erosion is simply not good enough. We can do better than that.

It has no doubt occurred to some of you that I have only been talking about the positive side of the situation, and there is supposed to be some kind of shadow side to this tradition. It is well-known that there are periodicals in this country which have severely criticized both Trungpa Rinpoche and his Vajra Regent. Well, that isn't a big deal, because there is no human being that one cannot find fault with if one puts one's energy into finding fault. The point is, the qualities of these teachers are unarguable, indisputable, and the genuineness of the transmission that they passed on to you is beyond anyone's doubt. If this transmission is lost, if these qualities are lost, then that's it - they're gone. They're not just going to reappear spontaneously. They have to be maintained; they must not be lost.

If we were talking about an invention or scientific discovery that was lost, something mundane or secular, then it would not be such a big deal. Even if a generation loses an invention or loses a discovery, someone comes along sooner or later who reinvents it or rediscovers it. So that's never been a problem. Unfortunately, dharma is not the same. If this extraordinary experience, if this extraordinary lineage of instruction, dies out, no one is going to come along who can resuscitate it. No one is going to come along and reinvent the Vajra Regent's dharma. So please be careful with this. By "be careful," I mean actually practice these teachings. Each of you have to personally take responsibility for the maintenance of this lineage.

I first met Trungpa Rinpoche when he was sixteen years old and I have been his friend ever since. I have loved him ever since then and he has loved me as well. Although he is no longer around, I still view all of his students as my siblings, as my family, and because of that I suppose there's been a sort of informality to the way I've addressed you this evening. I basically said whatever occurred to me, whatever I could think of [laughter], but I'm really delighted to have had the opportunity to speak to all of you and I thank each and every one of you for coming here this evening.