



Choden Rinpoche (right) with Geshe Tsulga at Kurukulla Center in Massachusetts, November, 2004.

Photo: David Kittenstrom

Study Versus Meditation

Do they complement or compete with your practice?

Is it important for somebody interested in achieving enlightenment to study? Certain lineages seem to place more emphasis on meditation than study, saying that study is not necessary because it just fills your mind with conceptual thoughts and that conceptual thinking is not meditation. Mandala asked a selection of lamas, academics, and practitioners for their opinions and observations.

We start with Nick Ribush asking Choden Rinpoche, Losang Gyalten Jigdrel Wangchuk, who had a formidable study record as a young man and who later went into solitary retreat for nineteen years, for his wise counsel ...

Choden Rinpoche: The recommended procedure is first to listen to teachings, then to contemplate what you have heard, and then to meditate. Therefore, at the beginning, it's important to find

a learned teacher with whom to study; then analyze with logical reasons whatever you have heard, which is what we mean by contemplation; and then focus single-pointedly on that which you have established after analysis, which in this context is what we mean by meditation. So, these three have to go in that order: hearing, contemplation, and meditation. This was said by both Shakyamuni Buddha and Buddha Maitreya.

NR: Thank you, Rinpoche. Which teaching should we listen to first?

CR: That depends on the kind of study you're planning to do. If it's going to be extensive, you should follow the example of the monks in the great monasteries of Sera, Drepung, and Ganden, where they study five major topics [Prajnaparamita (perfection of wisdom), Madhyamaka (middle way philosophy), pramana (valid cognition), abhidharma (phenomenology) and vinaya (monastic discipline)] for many years or even their entire life. At the intermediate level of study, you can focus on such texts as Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* or its commentary, the *Compendium of Training*. If you don't have much time, you can study the lam-rim.

NR: Is meditation part of the training of those monks in the great monasteries following the extensive course of study?

CR: Meditation is not a part of the formal study program, but there are monks who both study and meditate. They meditate on what they study – study and practice should be done together. The monks memorize by day, recite what they've memorized in the evening, and later at night, meditate on what they've studied. Most of the monasteries had a rule where, at night, after the disciplinarian had given the signal, everybody would have to stop reciting so as not to disturb those meditating. They weren't even allowed to walk around with their shoes on. So, even though meditation wasn't compulsory or part of the curriculum, the monks were encouraged to meditate, and the conditions for them to be able to do so were created.

NR: Were there meditation teachers or yogis in the great monasteries to guide the monks in their practice?

CR: Yes, and whatever the monks were taught was meant for meditation. They studied emptiness in order to meditate on it, calm abiding in order to meditate on it, and so forth.

NR: However, people who have jobs and families and not much time should focus on the lam-rim?

CR: Yes, but even lam-rim texts can be extensive, middle-length, or short, and the longer ones may be difficult for people with jobs and families. Short lam-rims – like *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, the *Swift Path*, or the *Blissful Path* – might be more suitable for people with little time.

NR: How should busy people meditate on the lam-rim they study?

Q. So without both study and meditation, we can't reach enlightenment?

A. It's important to meditate on whatever you study. If you don't, then what you've studied won't be of much help to your mind.

CR: They have to make the time to meditate, to practice. In Tibet, there was no set time for going to work. People worked on their own schedule, for as long or as short as they wanted. They could practice for a couple of hours in the morning before going to work. But here you have to work according to what your employer wants, so you have to make time as best you can, like an hour before work and an hour after.

NR: Is it possible for people practicing in such a way to gain realizations?

CR: It's possible. If you do your practice continuously, you'll become more and more familiar with it and find it very easy to meditate. In that way you'll be able to gain realizations.

NR: How should people practicing lam-rim in that way structure their meditation?

CR: Say you're starting with meditation on perfect human rebirth. Spend more time on that, and then give a little bit of time to all the other topics. In that way you cover the whole path. When you're very familiar with perfect human rebirth, spend more time on the next topic, impermanence and death, and then again, a little time on each of the remaining topics. Later, when you're familiar with that second topic, move on to the next one. However, before meditating on the lam-rim, you should do the preliminary practices in order to purify your mind and create merit.

NR: How does intellectual knowledge become non-conceptual? How does the mind transform?

CR: It takes a long time for the mind to become

non-conceptual. For ordinary people, the only non-conceptual perception is that of the five sense consciousnesses. The mental consciousness is mainly conceptual. We know the things we know through inferential cognition: "It's this because it's like that." This is also conceptual.

NR: Some people say that you should stop your conceptual mind and just let your mind rest in the non-conceptual state. Is that wrong?

CR: Perhaps some people say that, but when you study according to the great texts, when you study the sutras and the commentaries, it's not like that. And just because you have ceased conceptual thought doesn't mean that your mind has become non-conceptual. When you're practicing calm abiding, you're focusing on an object. At that time you're not supposed to be thinking of anything – you have to stop all conceptual thoughts, even virtuous ones, because they, too, disturb your calm abiding. But when you do, it doesn't mean that your mind has become non-conceptual.

NR: Rinpoche, when you meditated in Lhasa for all those years, what meditation did you do?

CR: I stayed in that house for more than twenty years, but I didn't meditate all the time. I recited mantras, did a little meditation, and did some other practices, so I wasn't able to gain the realization of calm abiding or anything like that. In order to gain the realization of calm abiding, you have to find a suitable place to meditate. That place was not conducive because I never knew when the Chinese police would come. They would just suddenly show up at any time, day or night, without warning, so I always had this doubt in my mind,

"When will they come? What will they do?" So my mind wasn't relaxed enough to focus 100 percent on the object, as it has to be in order to realize calm abiding.

NR: Rinpoche, do you have anything else to say on the relationship between study and meditation?

CR: In order to meditate, it's very important to study and to learn. Without learning there's no way you can meditate. It's up to you whether you're going to study extensively, a middling amount, or a little, but whatever meditation you do – analytical or placement – you have to know what you're going to meditate on. Without knowing the object, there's no way you can meditate on it, and if you try to do so, you're like the person Sakya Pandita described: an armless rock-climber.

NR: So without both study and meditation, we can't reach enlightenment?

CR: It's important to meditate on whatever you study. If you don't, then what you've studied won't be of much help to your mind. It's true that some teachers, in Tibet and elsewhere, have said that you don't need to study; all you have to do is meditate. They've held that those who study know things only in the way that a beggar knows wealth, whereas those who know through meditation are like the wealthy themselves – those who possess the riches. However, hearing, contemplation, and meditation are very important. All three should be done in conjunction because they complement each other. ❁

Choden Rinpoche was interviewed at Kurukulla Center, Massachusetts, on November 19, 2004. Interpreted by Thubten Damchoe and edited by Nick Ribush.

CHODEN RINPOCHE

Born in 1933 in eastern Tibet, Choden Rinpoche, Losang Gyalten Jigdreng Wangchuk, was recognized at age three as the reincarnation of the previous Choden Rinpoche, who himself had been one of the candidates for the twelfth Dalai Lama. At age eight he entered Rabten Monastery, and at age fifteen he went to Sera Je Monastery, where he studied the five main texts.

Although Rinpoche studied through the Lharam class and could have become a geshe, his teacher asked him not to take the exams yet. Choden Rinpoche decided to study the teachings on vinaya – monastic discipline – and he is regarded as one of the foremost experts on the subject. Choden Rinpoche

was one of the two Sera Je lamas selected to debate with His Holiness the Dalai Lama during His Holiness's geshe exams.

During the Communist Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959, Choden Rinpoche stayed in Tibet and went into solitary retreat for nineteen years. He never left his tiny, dark room in Lhasa from 1965 to 1985, and was virtually unknown in his monastery for this reason. In 1985 he was allowed to leave Tibet for India, and has since taught for many years to thousands of students at Sera Je Monastery in south India. At the request of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Choden Rinpoche has now visited the West several times to give teachings and lead retreats.