

The Uniqueness of Trungpa Rinpoche's Presentation of Meditation
A Talk by Derek Kolleeny
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Transcription: Liz Greene

Introduction

Good afternoon, and welcome. My name is Derek Kolleeny, and I've been asked to give a talk on the presentation of meditation by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, in what ways it was unique. I'm glad we have a few hours here today, because I have a lot to go through, his technique was very unique, and there are a lot of different aspects of that: the way he presented it, the logic, the way he trained students and the progression of the practice. So, I'm glad that we have a few hours to do that here today. Oh, we only have one hour? No, 30 minutes? 45? Okay, 47, 40... 47 and a half minutes. Okay. So, I'll try to be brief.

For starters, I think it's helpful to understand beforehand, that Trungpa Rinpoche can be difficult to comprehend. The way he speaks—his use of English language and the cadence or rhythm of his voice—can be very difficult to understand, so it's important to pay very close attention to what he's saying, and at the same time, to sort of let go of your mind a little bit. This is not a presentation on some linear topic that might happen in a school or business situation, it's not an analytical endeavor. Experiencing his transmission of the essence of Buddhism and enlightenment, in the way he does when he teaches meditation—and that is exactly what he's doing when he teaches meditation, he is conveying the enlightened state, it's important to remember that—the details are a support for that experience, for that transmission. So try to relax your mind a little bit and sort of merge your mind with his to the extent you can, and let his presentation—the oddity of the way he speaks in English in terms of grammar and word usage—not throw you off completely, but create an experience where your mind relaxes and opens, and becomes much more aware of itself, and what's going on in general.

Additionally, it's very difficult to understand the subtlety of the nuances of what he presents, which is why I'm so happy that this course is being held in general. Because this presentation that he gave in 1974 was, in terms of the vast array of presentations that he gave on meditation in particular and Buddhism in general, an incredible highlight. I'm really thrilled that this is being brought to the public and brought forward and made available and accessible in this way. And I very much appreciate personally, and I think it's an extra-wonderful opportunity for all of us to understand and experience his teachings, in that they're supplemented by talks by some of his most

elder, or, I should say, most accomplished, practiced students, such as Ani Pema Chödrön and the many others who are involved in teaching this course. And so this is a great opportunity, it's a great treasure. And I urge you to pay attention to every word of it. I hope that both Rinpoche's talks and the talks by everybody presenting this course, except this one, of course, will be transcribed and published, because it's very important to study them over and over again. He gives an enormous wealth of material in this seminar, I read through it again this morning and I was just, sort of blown away by the range and depth of material that he presents.

The Uniqueness of Rinpoche's Overall Presentation

In terms of the uniqueness of his presentation, for starters, you see in the description of this little discussion that Rinpoche's presentation was considered outrageous by Tibetans, which is probably a surprising statement to many of you. What's so outrageous about a teacher presenting the details of meditation practice? This happens many times, probably every day these days, all around the world in talks—live talks, recorded talks, podcasts, all sorts of different formats. But this is not a traditional format, a traditional scheme. Traditionally, teachings of this intimate and detailed nature, on the subtleties of meditation practice, were not given to large groups. They were more traditionally given on a one-to-one or small group basis, working with a few select students, or students that one might work with over time, in a particular situation. So for starters, just to do this level of subtlety and depth was unusual at the time for Tibetans, Tibetans did not do this generally. And again, we don't realize this, I think people don't realize this today, but the general presentation by Tibetan teachers in this country at that time, the early 1970s, and for many years around that time, was that the essence of meditation was not presented initially to students. The more traditional scheme of presentation for the Tibetan tradition was to start with practices such as chanting practice, pujas, perhaps the preliminary practices called the ngöndros, the four door or entryway practices to Vajrayana practice, which were commonly given right away by Tibetan teachers to their students in Tibet, and initially in the United States and the West in general.

Rinpoche's presentation was dramatically different than that. Other teachers were having their students chant in Tibetan things that they didn't understand, words they didn't understand, and Rinpoche wanted everything presented in English, wanted everything made accessible to the Western mind. He went to great lengths to translate terms and experiences and topics into understandable English language. In particular, the practice that he transmits here of shamatha and vipashyana meditation, in the Tibetan scheme is an advanced practice, believe it or not. It appears very simple, very basic, and it's given to beginners all over the world. In many ways, it seems very similar

to many Buddhist meditation techniques and practices that are taught and practiced by beginners all over the world in other Buddhist traditions. But in the Tibetan tradition, this practice of shamatha and vipashyana, in particular in the style that he presented, the unique technique that he presented was considered to be an advanced practice of Mahamudra or Maha Ati or Dzogchen, and would come after the preliminary practices, and other such preparatory practices which would take years of practice and study. And lastly, Rinpoche presented the essence, the heart, a very fruitional approach. Again, it's difficult to see this when we first listen to these teachings. And honestly, and personally, this is something I've come to appreciate more and more, over the many, many years that I've tried to understand these teachings and the practice and tried to learn how to do the practice, which I'm still working on. Additionally, Rinpoche blends all of this together with a very traditional presentation of the Dharma and the practice of meditation, in terms of providing terminology in Sanskrit and Tibetan, and spelling it out and trying to get his students to have that level of sophistication in their understanding, which was very unusual.

Sources of Rinpoche's Teachings

I've also been asked to speak about some of the possible sources for this teaching, for this particular technique. Apparently, Rinpoche taught this technique when he was in England, years before he came to North America. So it's not something that he developed in North America, although clearly, there was a progression in how he presented the teachings and practice of meditation during his time in North America, in particular, the first five or so years. We can find parallels or roots of his technique in basically the entire range of the Buddhist tradition, starting with the Buddha, in that Rinpoche emphasizes that the way to work with sense experience, the way to work with thoughts, is simply to acknowledge and to experience them as sense experience and thoughts, and not to add anything further to them. The way he describes this, in one of the talks, is almost identical to the way the Buddha presents this in one of the earliest sutas, as it said in the Pali tradition, called the Bahiya sutra, or suta—*Bahiya* means the one who wore bark for his clothing, interesting choice of outfit—where he says to this particular individual: “In the seen will be merely what is seen; in the heard will be merely what is heard; in the sensed will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized will be merely what is cognized. In this way, you should train yourself Bahiya. When, Bahiya, for you in the seen is merely what is seen, in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be with that. When Bahiya you are not with that, then you will not be in that. When Bahiya, you are not in that, then you will be neither here nor beyond, nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.” If you didn't know the context, you might think that was from a Mahamudra doha from the Tibetan Mahasiddha tradition.

We also see some parallels in the Theravadin tradition in terms of labeling, in particular the tradition propagated by Mahasi Sayadaw where there is the practice of labeling whatever is going on in one's experience. But there the labeling is varied, depending on what one is experiencing. It's very short and curt, but it's very varied. And Rinpoche's use of labeling is, as far as I can tell, unique. I cannot find any other source that uses his particular style of labeling whatever occurs, sense experience emotions, thoughts, aches and pains, memories, hopes and fears as thinking.

Rinpoche uses the traditional Mahayana framework for shamatha and vipashyana in these talks, referencing the key aspects of shamatha as mindfulness, and he gives the Tibetan for mindfulness, *trenpa*, and for knowing, the quality of knowing, *sheshin*. Those are the two main qualities of shamatha meditation in the system of Asanga, in the Mahayana tradition, which was transmitted to Tibet by Kamalashila, in his presentation on meditation. And that comes down through the Tibetan tradition and shows up in the way that Trungpa Rinpoche presents the meditation practice.

We also find a large influence of the Vajrayana tradition from which Rinpoche comes, and which basically everything that he teaches is imbued with, even though he spent a lot of his time teaching so called Hinayana, and Mahayana, as well as Vajrayana. It all comes from within that context of the view of Vajrayana and the technique of Vajrayana. In particular, in this practice, we see that in the technique of mixing mind with breath, and then mixing mind with space. This first appears in a poem by an Indian master named Aryadeva called the Prajnaparamita Upadesha (Teaching on the Transcendence of Wisdom) and is picked up by Machig Labdron and the Chöd tradition. Mixing mind with space is the supreme technique, or the supreme way of working with mind.

And then lastly, the overall attitude towards thoughts of *no problem*, and on the other hand, not dismissing them, is very much the essence of Mahamudra or Maha Ati and Dzogchen practice. Just experiencing thoughts, not cutting them off, not suppressing them, and not encouraging them. And that's a very important distinction, this fine line of the Middle Way, between subtly trying to dismiss thoughts, which many of us try to do—we have this inclination that meditation is about not thinking and we try to diminish or reduce thoughts as being a problem. But it turns out that thoughts are the means for experiencing wakefulness or enlightenment. So it's very important to experience thoughts, but in a certain way, where we don't give them extra energy, we don't get caught in the storyline, we don't go along with them, but we just experience them. And gradually we learn to see various aspects about our thoughts, about habitual patterns of the mind and how they work and where they come from, in particular, how they dwell

and where they go. So we see this influence of the Vajrayana and Mahamudra, and Dzogchen traditions.

Uniqueness of the Meditation Technique

Now let's talk about the technique and how unique the technique is. The open eye technique that Rinpoche teaches is not that unique. It is fairly common in many Buddhist traditions, although not all. But the most unique aspect of the technique is the emphasis on *precision* in working with the breath in a very specific way, where we don't follow the entire cycle of the breath, and this is very radical. We don't focus on the in-breath. And he says, just let the in-breath happen. Just leave a gap. Just stop. He doesn't say this word exactly, but basically the essence is *stop doing* on the in-breath. And that's a very subtle, small little change but it makes a world of difference in terms of the overall experience and the progression of the practice. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to pay attention to the details in which he presents the technique. And this is the most important one. And a lot of people have trouble working with the alternation of focusing on the out breath, and then leaving a gap, or boycotting, as he often said, or just opening on the in-breath. And many of us will instead follow both breaths, because, what's the big deal? It's important to understand that when a teacher like Trungpa Rinpoche gives particular, specific instructions, they *are* important, and they *are* a big deal. And in particular this one. He goes on at length in many, many places, about this aspect of the technique. And it pervades the experience, the entire progression of the practice. Basically, what's going on is that the out-breath is where we cultivate the mindfulness, the focused attention of the shamatha that is so important in the shamatha practice. Precision, the attention to the detail, stuff that helps us achieve, or train in, or cultivate, or develop, stability of mind, strength of mind, clarity of mind, and flexibility of mind.

And then on the in-breath, that gap has a number of different things going on with it. For one, it's the ultimate statement of cutting through spiritual materialism. Rinpoche talks in many places about cutting through spiritual materialism, in terms of spiritual materialism, of body, speech and mind. In meditation practice, spiritual materialism manifests as: I want to accomplish *doing* something, I want to accomplish being able to meditate. We all want to do that, we want to learn how to meditate, and we want to do it, and we want to succeed in it, just like everything else that we do. The whole point is that meditation is totally not like everything else we do. It's not something to accomplish, or achieve, or obtain. Meditation practice is a way of *undoing* that very propensity that we all have of wanting to *do* something, to *accomplish* something, to *achieve* something, in this case with our mind. So with the in-breath, and with letting go of any technique, we're gradually learning, ideally, how to let go of doing, and *doing* is

extremely, deeply ingrained in all of us. Basically, from the moment we're born, we're trying to do things, so it doesn't undo very quickly. That gap ends up provoking—is intentionally geared to provoke psychological material that is normally held in the subconscious, to come to the surface. To release the pent-up energy that is unconsciously involved in keeping that material at bay and bringing that material up within the context of meditation, so that we see it in a different way. We experience it in a different way. We learn how to release it in a very different way. This then becomes the bridge for how we bring meditation practice into our everyday life.

In terms of how we deal with difficult emotions and people and situations in our world, we've trained on the cushion in working with difficult emotions and experiences within ourselves that come up in meditation. And in case you haven't experienced it yet, you're in for a treat, because this will happen if you follow this practice. A lot of stuff will come up. Rinpoche would call this psychological baggage that we have in our system, in our psyche in our unconscious or subconscious. And we're processing it over time through meditation practice. So we are going through different states of mind as we go through the meditation practice, all because we don't have this continuous object of meditation to keep our attention steady. What normal meditation practices do that have a continuous object is that you are focusing on that object and suppressing everything else, putting everything else away, as if you can bypass it. And so that's the essence of, you know, people talk about bypassing these days, "it's okay, I can bypass that stuff and I'm just going right for, you know, some sort of enlightenment." It just doesn't work that way. You have to work with your inheritance, your wonderful karmic inheritance, that you've cultivated and watered and developed and nurtured throughout this lifetime, if not many lifetimes. That gap is the birth of intelligence.

What happens in the gap, the birth of intelligence, is basically emphasizing the other of the two main qualities of shamatha which Rinpoche talks about in these talks, he gives the Tibetan *sheshin*, he describes it initially as *knowing*, and then translates it as *awareness*. There's an interesting affiliation of that with vipashyana, because the bridge to vipashyana practice is developing that critical intelligence of knowing what's going on. Knowing initially whether we're meditating, or that we *are* meditating, remembering that we're meditating, and then beyond that, understanding how our mind works, understanding what neurosis is, how we create neurosis for ourselves, and how we have habitual patterns, and how we live in different realms created by these habitual patterns. He spoke on many occasions, one of his most common teachings was on those patterns for which he used the framework of the six realms of existence. Pairing them together, from the very start, we're practicing shamatha-vipashyana. Traditionally, one would start with shamatha, and then there would be a deliberate introduction of vipashyana using deliberate practices, deliberate analytical, discursive practices.

But Rinpoche teaches the Dzogchen, Maha Ati, or Vajrayana version of vipashyana, which is not an analytical practice, but is based on the direct seeing of the nature of our mind through the cultivation of the mindfulness, the focused attention to the outbreath, the precision that comes from that, and the realization of our mind that comes from that, and then the understanding of the overall process that comes from the gap, where we have this wonderful opportunity to experience, what does our mind do when it has nothing to alight upon? It's like a fish out of water, a fish out of water will flop around endlessly trying to find its home, its water. And our mind is like that, when you ask the mind not do something, it flounders and flips around every which way. And instead of presenting just that technique, which would be too advanced for people, and from what I hear, Rinpoche did that initially, and gave people completely formless meditation instruction, and I think he decided that that was not working for Westerners. So by the time of this teaching in 1974, he had already started to begin a process that went on for a number of years of adding more and more structure and formal, traditional aspects to his presentation of the practice of shamatha and vipashyana meditation, later going through all the traditional depths involved in the various aspects of the technique.

The Uniqueness of Rinpoche's Progression of the Practice

Let's see, the way that he presented the practice, the logic of the practice, or the progression of the practice was unique in that at the same time he presents the overall progression, he tells you what the more advanced stages of the practice are. But then he emphasizes that you need to experience shamatha before you can experience vipashyana, that vipashyana will happen naturally. You can't provoke it, you can't do some special technique, some magical formula, or specific exercise to provoke vipashyana. It has that sort of natural stop gap for our usual ego methodology of just wanting to skip ahead all the time. However, it's very important to pay really close attention when he says you need to actually *experience* shamatha for genuine vipashyana to naturally emerge. And I think many of us have learned over many, many years of trying to experience genuine meditation practice, that it is important to actually be able to experience a genuine, stable experience of shamatha practice, and only then will vipashyana emerge.

So, in the progression as he presents it, he makes an emphasis upon not deceiving ourselves, thinking that we're able to do something we're not able to do, and thereby further encouraging and sharpening the discriminating knowledge within students, which is the incipient form of what he calls *prajna* or transcendent wisdom, which is what experiences, or sees directly, the nature of reality, which ideally leads, or is said to lead to the enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition.

Early on in his time in America, he presented meditation instruction on a one-to-one basis, working very closely, physically and psychologically with his students individually, because that is so important. So when we see then, this presentation to a large group of people that he did in this course, and in many other times, he therefore created a system where those early students—his earliest students, that he'd been training for a number of years in the practice, in the understanding—he then has them act as meditation instructors, for other students. And he created this whole system of meditation instructors where people would meet one-on-one with beginners. And intermediate students would meet one-on-one with more advanced students. *Advanced* meaning, primarily, just you've been doing it longer. So you've sort of been down that road, you've experienced more of what one experiences in this practice. And he placed an enormous emphasis on this and being very precise about his presentation of the technique and our being very literal about following that technique. It's important to do this with the meditation instruction system as well, and really make use of, utilize that opportunity that the system he created—which exists today—of meditation instruction, and instructor and student, continues, because that is the direct link with him. There's a transmission that occurs in that situation that's hard to describe and quantify.

In addition, in terms of the presentation, you'll see in this series of talks—there's a talk called *Understanding the Nature of Mind* or something to that effect, that may not be the exact title—he gives this whole talk on different aspects of mind, which, in many other traditions of Buddhism, would be very unusual to give that much of a technical, detailed talk about the structure of mind in the context of a teaching on meditation practice. But that was a mark of the uniqueness of his presentation. And he did this many, many times when he taught meditation, he would begin by explaining the structure of mind. Because the practice in this tradition is all about understanding the mind, the mind is the source of everything, as the Buddha says in the opening verse of his Dhammapada, everything begins with the mind. The Vajrayana tradition in particular focuses on the mind, and understanding the different aspects of mind, because that's what the vipashyana experience is, in essence, it's understanding the nature of mind. And understanding the nature of mind is understanding the nature of the entirety of reality. So he gives this very complicated talk, where he goes through three different aspects of mind, or at least he goes through two of them, in other places he goes through the third called *sem*, but here he goes through *lodro* and *rigpa*. Then he goes through the five *skandhas* in the midst of a talk of meditation. Again, the structure of our experience, of ourselves and our world, of how we experience. The meditation practice is an immersion in understanding who we are, and how we experience our world. So a very unusual way of presenting the practice, by giving that level of sophistication to students in the course of a presentation on meditation practice.

Lastly, I think, is that it's not evident, because Rinpoche doesn't say, okay, now I'm going to give you a guided meditation—and these days, people do guided meditations, and everyone will get in the posture, and the teacher will go through a guided meditation—but a lot of what Rinpoche is saying is an actual guided meditation, where he's describing the way you can work with your mind, what you experience on the cushion. He had a rather amazing, if not magical ability to understand what his students were experiencing. I think he had the intimacy of his relationship with his students where he would talk to them about everything, and ask them what their experience is, and really understand what we were experiencing. And so he's describing that in many of these talks, he'll shift from a very technical description of qualities and terms and how you spell them and so forth, and then he'll shift into actually describing how to practice, how to meditate. And I think it's helpful to understand when he's doing that, and actually sit with that, and let yourself experience what he's trying to present and relax a little bit the usual propensity to try to understand and categorize and associate what's being transmitted, and let him lead you in that experience of meditation practice, where he's also *using* his, maybe I should say, incomplete grammar, his usage of English grammar, which is not, you know, perfect or normal for most of us. I think that's part of the way that he's creating an experience for us. I think it's helpful to know that, so when he does that, you can experience it in that way. I think that's all I have to say today.

Oh, one more very important thing is that the alternation of the of the breath, the in-breath and the out-breath, the focus on the out-breath, and then letting go of the in-breath. He describes the in-breath as being the essence of the survival instinct, the essence of the instinct to establish, affirm, and build up our sense of who we are, or *that* we are, our sense that we exist. And the outbreath is an emphasis upon opening and expanding and letting go of our clinging to who we are, and clinging to I, the *I*, the sense that *I* exist. So that's really important and also radical and unique, in that most meditation teachers and practices are really meant to calm the practitioner, and help the practitioner stabilize themselves. There's a lot of emphasis on loving kindness in a certain way, particularly these days, towards ourselves. And when you look at it through the lens, or the framework of what he's presenting here, we can begin to see that some of that ends up reinforcing the sense of self. Rinpoche, and his characteristic style of cutting through spiritual materialism, is, from the beginning, deconstructing our sense of self, and our sense of security in that self, in that sense of self, and the way of using meditation practice as further means of establishing and securing and feeling our sense of self and feeling safe in who we are. Which is not to say that meditation was presented as a devastating, you know, existential devastation sort of practice. In fact, the opposite, where later he begins to explain that shamatha practice is the ultimate loving kindness, or metta, or maitri practice. And that actually, that way of relating to

ourselves, of not clinging to the sense of self is a way of reducing suffering. And that way of learning how to work with thoughts by releasing them and not investing them with importance is the essence of maitri, or loving kindness to oneself.

So I think I've said a lot of different things, and maybe, hopefully, some of it makes sense. Let me see, there's one other thing, okay, this will be the last thing, since I'm almost over time. In line with the whole experience of cutting through spiritual materialism, and meditation as not something that we accomplish and build ourselves up with, one of the key aspects of this technique, and the way that Rinpoche presented it, is the experience of boredom. The last thing that we want out of life, out of any experience, out of any endeavor, is boredom. And he made that into something to feel good about (laughs a little). He encouraged the experience of boredom in this interesting way, that boredom was the experience of the opportunity to experience our preoccupation with content and entertainment, our incessant, constant fixation on there having to be something going on. And first, we experienced that as frustration, or he called it hot boredom, and then gradually, over time, we begin to see the incessant, repetitive and not helpful quality of that habitual fixation and we experienced what he called cool boredom. And through that process, we're learning how to implement another very important aspect of the technique that he called *touch and go*, where we touch upon thoughts, and then we let go, which I described earlier as not dismissing them, and not fixating on them. He was unique in his ability to come up with very nice phrases that really captured the essence of the technique in a way that we could relate to and experience, individually and personally.

I think that's it for today, I think we'll end there. I hope you enjoy this series, and I hope you watch it a few times because it takes a few times to really connect with it. Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to try to contribute something useful to the series. Fortunately, there are really wonderful teachers who will explain this material to you. Thank you.