

Dr. Nida Chenagtsang & Justin Von Bujdoss: Dzogchen and Dark Retreat

[Steve] In this episode, I am joined by Dr. Nida Chenagtsang and Justin Von Bujdoss. Dr. Nida and Justin discuss the esoteric Dzogchen practices of Trekchö and Tögal, and comment on their application to inner emotional disturbance, and to times of external conflict and war. Dr. Nida and Justin extensively discuss the mysterious practice of dark retreat, in which the retreatant seals himself in complete darkness for days or weeks at a time, triggering powerful hallucinations which can be worked with using special techniques for spiritual advancement. Dr. Nida and Justin discuss the history of dark retreat, compare the differences in the various schools of its practice, warn of its dangers in terms of psychosis, and consider the potential that dark retreat offers for attaining Buddhist enlightenment. So without further ado, Dr. Nida Chenagtsang and Justin Von Bujdoss.

Dr. Nida Chenagtsang and Justin Von Bujdoss, welcome to the podcast.

[Justin] Thank you. Thank you.

[Steve] I'm so delighted to be talking with both of you at the same time, and you both are in the same place.

[Justin] That's right. We are at Pure Land Farms in LA.

[Steve] Yes, and I understand, Dr. Nida, you have just returned from leading a pilgrimage in Bhutan with Ian Baker, previous guest to this podcast and in fact a dialogue partner of yours on this podcast. And I understand, Justin, you've just finished leading a week's Trekchö retreat there at Pureland Farms.

[Justin] That's right. It's associated with Dr. Nida's commentary on the Yutok cycle. The commentary is called "Mirror of Light." And we just finished a seven-day Trekchö retreat as part of coming to the end of the cycle of practice and study.

[Steve] Very cool. I'm curious about Trekchö, if you might say a little something about that. And I'm also curious, Dr. Nida, about your time in Bhutan.

[Justin] Well, Genla, why don't you start with Bhutan?

[Dr. Nida] I think, yeah, the Bhutan trip was very nice. And I think today there are many Buddhist practitioners, especially Vajrayana practitioners. So Bhutan is officially saying it is the only or the main Vajrayana country in the world now. And I think it's the unique energy, the blessing of the land. As Padmasambhava said in the past, great masters bless the land, and now the land can bless the people. "Kanza ki ne chinchilapa, ne ki kanza chinchilapa." So I think that really makes sense. You can really feel the presence of great masters, especially Guru Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal, Longchenpa. And also you really feel like they are a blessing. Once you are there, you feel their blessing is inseparable from you, which is what is called the Vajra state.

[Justin] Yeah, I had the pleasure to be with Dr. Nida last year on the pilgrimage in Bhutan. It was incredible. Did you have more thoughts or less thoughts?

[Dr. Nida] I had less thoughts, which was good for my practice of Trekchö.

[Justin] So the practice of Trekchö, in one way of thinking about it, maybe you could say Atiyoga has two cycles or two main aspects. One is Trekchö and one is Tögal. But Tögal doesn't really make sense unless there's a good grounding in understanding the nature of mind and the nature of Rigpa. And Trekchö is really the way of creating a nice stable foundation to be able to have a good relationship to the open, dynamic nature of awareness. And with that, if one is really stable in their practice, then Tögal practices really help the practitioner to stabilize and enhance that experience so that the Rigpa state becomes increasingly clear and one's confidence becomes really strong.

[Dr. Nida] I think the Tibetan word "trekchö": "trek" means something hard, something solid and hard. And this hardness, the solid things, we can find in the material world — like the diamond is the hardest one. And then we have metals like iron, and rocks, and there are many hard objects. So in a similar way, we have this hardness in our mind. The hardness in the mind is the fixation. We have so much of this fixation. And once we are extremely fixed on something, it becomes a blockage internally. It can be emotional blockage or mental blockage. And that stops us from flexibility, opening, and so on. So "chö" means cutting through, or becoming free from that solidness or hardness in us.

Many people, for example, when you have a doubt, you are so much fixed on the doubt. Once there's an over-fixation of the doubt, you get stuck with the doubt. And when we talk about the Madhyamaka tradition, why are they talking so much about debate? Because today we have so many fixations about our views and our ideas and so on. It is good that you debate that. Through the debating, you either

understand the new views, or you accept the other views, or you let go of your own views. So then you become more flexible.

I think this Trekchö we can find in the Madhyamaka and many different traditions too. And also maybe in vipassana, when you scan your mind, you try to feel your emotions or feelings or sensations. If you are able to scan it well, then you don't get stuck with this fixation. I think it's all a kind of similar — all meditations are talking the same way. But I like this Tibetan word "trekchö" personally because it goes into the heart. So what is our mental-emotional problem? That's the fixation. And then what we need to do is free ourselves from that fixation — like there is a blockage and we have to unblock that.

[Justin] When I think of it, I think of "cutting through hardness," but it's really the hardness of conceptual thinking, of labeling, of ideas, and how all of this makes us really individual — you're you, I'm me, let's fight. But Trekchö is really this way of resting past the hardness.

[Dr. Nida] Cutting through the hardness. What is your understanding about that? If you have a difficulty of emotion, you got stuck there, you want to free yourself from that. How do you translate that?

[Steve] Well, I'm not familiar personally with the practice, but I think as Lama Justin said, "cutting through hardness" or sometimes "cutting through solidity." It's often translated like that.

[Dr. Nida] I'm sure you know this practice, because in an emotional way we all have emotional blockages, we have to come over through those blockages. That's why I have this kind of new idea: when we talk about translators — there are great translators in the past, and today there are also amazingly good translators. And every translator comes up with good ideas and tries their best to translate in a precise way. But maybe one person's very precise translation works for a certain group of people, but not for everyone. So therefore, I'm really now more and more coming up with the idea of, you know, we explain the word by word and then how to really translate it — up to you. Not disrespecting the translators, they are great translators, but some become very poetic, some very technical, some want to be very precise.

[Justin] Yes, and as you said, Steve, how do you release difficult emotions?

[Steve] Are you really asking me that? I think one can go inside or outside. One can broaden the context of their awareness — that works quite well, to go big. Or go inwards, dive into a feeling, or see through the experience of the emotional reaction. And then it releases almost from its particular emotional valence, it often

becomes joyful or humorous. Hard to retain, hard to stay fixed. That would be my best attempt, but I'm no Dzogchenpa.

[Dr. Nida] I must say, actually you are. Your translation of "Trekchö" became a whole page. That's good. For some people it can be one word, for some it can be a page, for many people it can be a hundred pages. That's exactly what I'm saying.

[Steve] When you talk about this Trekchö and this idea of cutting through fixedness or solidness, I can't help but think of the time we're living in. We're recording this in November 2023, right around the time when conflict in the Middle East, Palestine, has occurred. And when people listen to this at another time in the future, no doubt conflict will be happening somewhere too. One thing that seems to be happening with this conflict is a great pressure to take sides. Are you on this side or that side? What would you say — is Trekchö relevant in a situation like that?

[Dr. Nida] That's exactly the human ideas, the human political views, the human divided nationalistic views. All these things are solidified, become so hard, become like a rock. And then two rocks coming together, they clash. That's exactly what we can understand in the context of Trekchö. If there are two rocks rolling together, they clash. And both get damaged, both get broken. This is exactly what happens with war: two groups of people fighting, both have their own reasons and their historical views, but at the end, there are different views. And both sides are so solidified. For us, it's difficult to analyze, it takes time judging them. But the real problem is the clash between two big rocks.

But then if you think, if these rocks become rivers? Two rivers clashing together — what happens? They unite together, they join together, they become a stronger river. I think this metaphor shows exactly what I think about all human conflict in general. The conflict between two countries or two nationalities is the same nature as the conflict between two people. On a small scale, it's two people fighting; on a large scale, it becomes two countries fighting. And on a large scale, many people suffer, get killed, murdered, die, and there is loss.

[Justin] The part of the United States that I live in, Brooklyn, New York, has the largest Jewish population outside of Israel. And the neighborhood I live in has one of the largest Palestinian populations inside the United States. And you see now in all of these protests, shutting down different parts of the city. And people are telling everybody: pick a side. Like Dr. Nida says, all this kind of bifurcation is only going to create more conflict. And there's so much fear as well. You can't possibly believe the other side is right. You have to believe what I think, what I say.

I kind of feel like Trekchö was almost made for these times. Now, for all of these problems we see — whether it's what's happening in the Middle East, or in Ukraine,

or the environmental crisis — these ideas where "I am a human, I get to do whatever I want to nature," that's also a binary. All of these binaries are causing these problems. And it might be that one of the best ways to solve some of these problems is to be able to cut through these ideas. Cut through the sense of myself as a solid person who has right to this land that you don't have.

It's interesting teaching Trekchö because more and more people are becoming interested in it because they can feel the power of the release when they can release some of the things they're really attached to. They can feel spaciousness and they feel it in their body. This really becomes a medicine for the mind, but also a medicine that can help transform the way we relate to one another.

[Dr. Nida] Very penetrating. Yes, the heart of the head. It benefits from body to energy to mind.

[Justin] Dr. Nida was talking yesterday on the last day of the retreat about meditation as medicine. And I still remember being here with Dr. Nida maybe two years ago, and he was telling me about Drapa Ngönshe and when he started to study Sowa Rigpa. How has meditation changed? This has been helping me understand that it's not only about the mind — it's about the entirety of being, including the way we are in the world, the way we think about the world, the way we're in harmony or disharmony with the world.

[Dr. Nida] Yes, of course, that is the original Buddhist view. The 84,000 kleshas and 84,000 dharmas. Kleshas are the disease and dharmas are medicines. I think that's the original Buddha's view.

It's interesting, Steve, you're asking. We're talking about Trekchö and Dzogchen, and you're bringing the current political conflict into this interview. Many people would say, "Oh, it's nothing to do with us, it's happening in the Middle East, in Ukraine, in Russia. We are out of these problems." And sometimes also people have this kind of "we are Buddhists, we are practitioners, we cannot do anything, we don't want to interact." Of course, political views always have complications. And myself, I'm not interested in any political conflict and reviews. But unfortunately, the political situation becomes a condition of our daily life. We are conditioned by politics, decisions and views and controls and conditions.

So I think to make Dharma more accessible, more part of our daily life, we must bring our own Dharma experiences into our life, and use this path to try to understand what is happening in the world. About fights, about conflict, and how people are out of control of their own emotions. If you think of Israel and Palestinians, the conflict is an accumulation of thousands of years of emotions. The hatred, the anger, and the rage is not just because of a ten-year or twenty-year or

hundred-year problem. It's a combination of thousands of years of this kind of human emotional accumulation. And people are unable to work how to process, how to purge, how to purify, or to liberate from the emotions. There is a lack of this kind of method. And then it becomes huge accumulations of blockages, from generation to generation. And the rage and anger are so powerful, so explosive.

If maybe those people, especially the people involved in the higher powers, were more trained in Trekchö, if they had a more gentle, softer view, instead of having very strong nationalistic views and national identities, if they focused more on the humanness, I think maybe the conflict would be much softer.

[Justin] We don't really value being soft these days in the world. A little passive, receptive.

[Dr. Nida] Every day now, and also as you said, we have to pick a side.

[Justin] And the person who doesn't pick a side is sometimes not trusted. And I think this speaks to the complexity, but also to the necessity. Nadi yoga and Trekchö are a very powerful medicine. And they are also very personal. It's a medicine that solves a very personal problem — what are my blockages, what is my hardness. Maybe you can speak about it in broad terms, but how it manifests is very unique.

[Dr. Nida] Everything can soften. I can understand really this fixation on nationalism. When I grew up in Tibet, I can understand all the emotions, how you accumulate, how you build up and grow up in your environment, your culture, your tradition, and how much you feel the outer pressures and conditions. And then you need to pick your side and fight with somebody. But I think once you are really trained, when you see things in a different way, especially our own emotions and how we are solidifying ourselves, with the practice there's always a way to make it softer, gentler, and more peaceful.

Those are the human steps to make ourselves peaceful. And we can achieve what I think is unconditional peace — internal peace. Once we are able to build this kind of individual internal peace, and then when we come together as a group, then we have this collective peace. And both sides, having collective inner peace, meeting another group becomes two rivers meeting together — it becomes one river.

[Steve] I'm curious. If one side has applied this softening, but one's enemy has not. If a country has softened its nationalism, but its neighbor has not. Is there a danger of the softened one being at the mercy of the less enlightened, harder neighbor?

[Dr. Nida] Everything has a price. If you stay solid and in conflict, fighting has a price. If you become soft, you accept what happens to you — it has a price too. But end of day, I think, both becoming peaceful, both becoming a river — that's the best solution. But at least if one side is a river and one side is a rock, throwing rocks in the river, it may be the river is blocked or damaged. But the river can never stop. If you are so strong, so tolerant, able to accept, and really your final goal is the long-lasting peace — generations of peace — even if one side is the river, receiving the other side's rocks, in the long term, still a giant river. And because of the river's patience and gentleness, which are so powerful, the other side — maybe in other generations — the rocks become a river too.

[Justin] The way I remember Ashoka's story: he had been an emperor. He fought this brutal war against the neighboring kingdom, the Kalinga. All of these people were killed. The story of him wandering through the battlefield — he won. But he saw what happened. He saw all of the death, all of the destruction, and this changed his heart. And we see the same thing in non-violent protest response — the civil rights movement in the United States, or in South Africa, where the fluid side is able to be fluid and is not aggressive. And the aggressor becomes more aggressive, and this causes its own people to see how wrong their actions are.

Sometimes even with our own anger, it can become more and more intense. But then we will notice some moment where we've gone too far. I understand the fear of, if one side gets too passive or too much like a river, what is the other side going to do? And like you say, Dr. Nida, it will throw rocks until it itself also dissolves. But it's not a very beautiful process when we're talking about nation states, because it means the aggressor needs to recognize how it has been wrong, or its own people say "no, we can't do this anymore." It can even be seen a bit in Russia, where people say "this is too much." And also in this current conflict, where you have many people in Israel calling for a ceasefire. It's almost as if it causes compassion to be generated.

[Steve] Thank you for sharing your insights on that subject. We originally planned to come here to talk about Dark Retreat. Both of you have discussed dark retreat to some extent on this podcast. Quite an in-depth episode. And following, Dr. Nida, I believe your own commentary, your own composition of dark retreat instructions. I wonder, Dr. Nida, if you might say something about your background in dark retreat. You described it as one of the most experiential meditation practices in the Buddhist tradition.

[Dr. Nida] Okay, firstly, you said my terma. I don't call it my terma, it's my commentary. This is my new book, I call it "Commentary of Mahamudra and Dzogpa Chenpo" in Tibetan. When I was in the retreat — I think you interviewed me after my retreat — during and after that retreat, I wrote this commentary about

Mahamudra, the essential instruction about Karma Mudra, and then the Trekchö, the Tögal Dzogpa Chenpo, and also dark retreats. There's a chapter about dark retreats. I wrote it here, it's in Tibetan.

First, I wrote about a general introduction — what dark retreat is. Dark retreat is part of the Dzogpa Chenpo tradition. Second part is the history of dark retreat.

"Tögal": "Tö" means the skull, the forehead. "Gal" means a crossing — something coming out, crossing out your skull, and then you have the visions. The Tögal has actually three kinds: first, "Gathel," the white teaching — white refers to the light, the teaching with light. Second is "Münchö," the dark teaching — the dark retreat. And then the other one is "Tathel" — mixed colors, white and black together. Daytime you have the training with sunlight and the night you do the practice with the moonlight or butter lamp. Traditionally it's a butter lamp, but now we can use even electric light.

There are three ways of teaching. But normally first we are introduced to the light teaching — to practice with sunlight in the morning, early, and late afternoon. When I was in Lhasa, we received this teaching according to the traditional tradition, called the "Türke Mengadrönchu" — the oral instructions. We were only four people. We got this training every day and evening. We did a lot of that, and sometimes with the butter lamp and the moonlight. Moonlight is not that easy because you have to be at a certain point. Sunlight, every morning if the sun is there, you can do it and evening too. But moonlight, because of the moon phases, not so easy — you have to wait for close to full moon and after full moon, you have good light to practice. But butter lamp is quite easy.

In the history of dark retreat, it is kind of interesting. The most famous dark retreat texts are from the Nyingma tradition. In the Bön tradition, they have dark retreat literature too — that is another big topic: who is first, Nyingma Dzogchen or Bönpo. There are lots of discussions. Only the real practitioners don't talk much, but some people with the hardness of ideas really want to prove why it's coming from Bön or why it's not. That part I didn't want to go there.

In the Nyingma tradition, the most famous dark retreat text is called the "Golden Single Syllable" — Yangti Nakpo. We have Ati, Yangti, and Chiti. Especially Shangjé Lingpa's Dzogchen teaching talks about these three types of Ti. The Yangti especially refers to dark retreat.

If we check this Golden Single Syllable, it has two lineages: one far lineage and one closer lineage. The far lineage comes from Buddha Samantabhadra, then Vajradhara, Vajrasattva, Garab Dorje, Jampalshenphen and Shri Singha, then Guru Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal, Vimalamitra, Vairochana, and then

Vairochana's heart disciple. The interesting part is the terma was revealed by Yutok, and Yutok's dark retreat was in the 12th century. So it means that Yutok's dark retreat is actually quite early compared to other terma traditions.

What interests me is that Yutok's dark retreat instructions might be one of the earliest. And they are non-sectarian in a very skillful way, because if you do the dark retreat of Yutok, you experience what the Kalachakra explains and also what the Nyingma tradition explains. Yutok put two traditions together.

Historically, dark retreat is not only Nyingma — we also have dark retreat in the Kalachakra Tantra. The Kalachakra Tantra's dark retreat discusses visions called "Tongzuk" — the empty form. You see something, but it's intangible. Very similar to a vision or hallucination. And the Kalachakra says: don't follow the visions. Because if you follow them, it's a kind of side track, a distraction — it will bring you to the wrong path.

But the Nyingma view says: it's your energy, it's the color and the form. You don't avoid it. You try to see through — to see the nature and essence of that. It's like a dream. When we talk about lucid dreaming, the Kalachakra says you have dream visions and don't follow them. But the Nyingma says you see a dream and become lucid, you know it's your dream. So it's transformable — you can transform it, multiply it, purify it, and use it in a skillful way. Because you are playing with your energy, exercising your mind and subtle energy, and through that you can get to liberation.

Personally, I'm super interested in these two different views about dark retreat, because the Yangti of Yutok is close to both of them.

Regarding my personal experience: one of my dark retreat teachers is from Amdo, Karchil Kulothang. He has two dark retreat teachings: Kamjul (the lineage from Eastern Tibet, the Kham region) and Üjul (the teachings from Central Tibet). He has both lineages.

When we talk about teachers or gurus, there are two types. One gives empowerment, instructions, and explains the tantric teachings — it's mostly like our normal education system. And my teacher, Karchil Kulothang, has the nature of the Mahasiddha style. The scholar style explains the tantras and teachings very precisely. The Mahasiddha style gives very essential teachings — direct Rigpa introduction.

When I went to meet him, he was very solid, not much talking, very impressive. Later I was amazed because just one day before I went there, his son had passed away — a car accident. Someone came while we were receiving teaching and told

him. I was a bit shocked. And he said: "As a Dharma practitioner, we meditate on impermanence every day. This is a part of my practice — everything is impermanent, including my son." He said: "Dharma is action, that's what I'm experiencing." My master was like that.

When he gave us the instructions, he told us his own dark retreat story. His first retreat was six months. He was locked in a dark room by his master — the Mahasiddha style. He said the first days — he was maybe fifteen or sixteen years old, a young boy — he was so bored and wanted to come out. He was literally imprisoned in the dark. But then later he started to have visions. He said he was out of time — he didn't know six months had passed already. So many visions. After six months, his master asked him to come out. He didn't want to get out! He was having so much fun. When he said that later, I was thinking: a sixteen-year-old boy in the dark for six months. He described visions of infinite space and lights and Buddhas. I was thinking maybe for him it was like six months of free video games. He enjoyed so much and didn't want to come out.

When he was talking about Rigpa, first he criticized the Seven Treasures of Longchenpa. He asked me: "Do you know the Seven Treasures of Longchenpa?" I was kind of very proud. I said: "Oh, yes — they are the top Dzogpa Chenpo texts." And he looked at me and said: "They are all poems." He shocked me. With my respect for Longchenpa, I thought — how can he be a poet? In Tibetan, "poet" means like someone who just talks blah blah, it doesn't mean anything. And he said: "I had the Seven Treasures and the collection of terma teachings. I buried all of them." Another shock. We are all talking about libraries and publishing books, and he said: "I buried all my books." In Tibetan, "ter la be" means he sealed them, put them in a box, dug the earth, and buried them — hidden like termas. And then he said: "Now I'm free from the books."

He actually removed my mask of pride, the mask of knowing many things. He emptied my head. And then he gave us the introduction and the very essential instructions of the dark retreat. The time and space completely transformed. When he said there's no text, when there's no this and that, everything became blank. It was daytime, but for me that was dark too. In the darkness, the master manifests as a vision. That was one of my most experiential teachings. I realized that the empowerment, teaching, and words are all in one — the way he transmitted.

He was saying there are so few people practicing these precious teachings now. He gave the famous Vajrayana example: the milk of the lioness. "Have you ever drunk lioness milk?" Not every container can hold the milk of the lioness.

In my text, I wrote about the ten special characteristics of dark retreat. In a very simple way, it says: mostly in the Vajrayana we visualize ourselves as the deity, we

visualize the channels and energy and colors and forms. But the dark retreat teaching says most texts are talking about imaginations and visualizations. The dark retreat is the direct experience — you're not imagining or visualizing, you feel and experience directly. One is just talking and one is seeing. It's different.

The famous seven steps of the practice can be for seven days. The practice can be for 49 days — it depends on the practitioner's base, merits, and so on. Either you do every step in every day, finishing in seven days, or you do the gradual one: one practice for seven days, so seven times seven is 49 days.

And then the signs of the dark retreat. The "Golden Single Syllable" text talks about what visions you're supposed to have, and explains them. There are drawings of the signs — in ancient times, practitioners were often illiterate, so they just saw the drawings: "I was in the dark, I saw this one, that one." It's a very well illustrated book.

My favorite part of the book is the last part: how to remove the obstacles. I think this part is really missing today. All spiritual practice can have side effects. It's a very common problem now. There are more and more practitioners, and they want to practice higher, more experiential practices — and dark retreat, when I say it's very experiential, then people think: "This is what I need, this is what I want."

We can understand that — we do something and want to see results. But when we are not ready, it can be dangerous. So we talk about the historical master of Kärseel, Yönten Gyamtso, who wrote a commentary of the Golden Single Syllable. He says that the teacher has to be experienced in how to work with the side effects. The dark retreat can trigger a lot of lung (wind) disturbances — channel disturbance and so on. It can cause visions, scary feelings. Some people get panic attacks. Mostly what we call lung disorders. Today we can say psychological issues — panic attacks, hallucination. Dark retreat can become a basis of psychosis too, if you are not really ready and present.

I saw some people who went completely crazy because of 49 days of dark retreat. This person was not my student — he was a student of a very old, very well-known Tibetan Lama. In my medical understanding, he was not ready for dark retreat because he was already suffering from some mental issues, already having some psychosis and mental breakdown. And this is the problem: when we don't have a place where you are guarded and checked up. If something happens, someone can tell you to stop the retreat. We really need to take care of people carefully. This man finished 49 days and when he came to me, he was completely out. The hallucinations were too strong — he couldn't control anymore. It can be very dangerous.

[Justin] What you said to me before the 49-day retreat, and that is still in my mind: how much time do you have for integration afterwards? At the time, I didn't have that much time. You told me: "In Tibet, maybe we would do three months." This really opened up my eyes to the importance of integration and care even after a retreat. So that people can blend things, take care of themselves. And this is another reason why a focused, professional, stable place to do these retreats is important — so that people can also have support around integration during and after.

[Dr. Nida] My main instruction for him is: any moment you think it's too much, come out. Don't say it's your commitment and you have to finish 49 days. Don't force yourself. When you feel pressure or something is not well, just come out. Traditionally we say "don't break the retreat," but in dark retreat, if you feel it's too much, you should come out.

[Justin] No, it was good. In fact, I didn't want to leave. Because you told me I could come out, that's why I didn't want to come out. If you'd told me I was not allowed to come out, maybe I'd be thinking how to get out. No, it was good, but... you see a lot. And that can be overwhelming.

[Dr. Nida] Yes, it's a very deep inner journey. Today in our modern society, people are looking for experiences, new experiences, new types of pleasure. I think the reason new drugs are coming is because people want new experiences. And the drugs are stronger and they want stronger experiences. Humans are searching for experiences.

In some tantric texts, they talk about substances. But only if you want to have some kind of experience — once you have one experience, that's it, you should not repeat it again. If you repeat it again and again, you get addicted. And I think we should really be careful with these things. What I think is: first, make sure you have a stable base, be very well grounded. And then these natural experiences, the visions from dark retreat, they are very healthy. You can have experiences, you can have visions, but I think we should talk about healthy visions and healthy experiences.

[Justin] And feel comfortable with the mind that has these experiences, which is so important.

[Dr. Nida] Today different people are using the word Dzogchen or Trekchö, Mahamudra, or whatever they call "non-dual meditation," and they take substances. "When I take substances, I'm in that state. My teacher told me I'm free from limits." Of course substances can affect you — that's why you're addicted. I think we should really be careful with these things.

The ten characteristics say dark retreat is very experiential, very visual, very direct. It's not talking blah blah. It's what you really see. When we go for a dream, we see a dream. The dream is a vision, the dream is a hallucination too. But even if it's a hallucination, once you become lucid, you know it's your mental projection. So dark retreat is not very different from dream. But in dark retreat, when you are meditating, you are lucid. In dream we are not lucid — we have to become lucid.

Last night I actually had a very nice dream. I saw a deep blue sky and the sunlight was very bright. I thought it was the sun. I looked carefully — it was the moon, a white circle, perfect. And inside the moon there was a perfect Yutok, smiling. I took a picture: "This picture, I can show Christiana — smiling Yutok in the moon." It exactly sounds like a dark retreat vision. The only question is: are you becoming lucid or not?

Medical hallucination — that's a kind of very unhealthy, harmful thing. People have hallucinations, they don't know how to control. They harm themselves or harm somebody else. That's harmful. But when you are in the dark and meditating, you have 100% awareness. You are lucid there. You are seeing your own energy. In Yutok's expression, it is called "seeing your jñana directly" — you experience directly. You're not imagining or visualizing. It's directly there, in front of you. Open your eyes, it's in front of you. Close your eyes, it's in front of you. Inside or outside, it doesn't matter. Free from the walls.

[Justin] That experience in my dark retreat also — sometimes after the retreat it feels like a lot of stuff has burned off. A lot of places of holding on tightly. Like at the beginning of the conversation, talking about the hardness — hardness around identity, hardness around concept. It feels like that is just burning off very naturally by experiencing the spaciousness, almost as if you are in the middle of endless space. And of course, Rigpa is endless space.

I remember after the first seven-day retreat, at the time I was working on Rikers Island for New York City Department of Correction, and I felt that several years of just the intensity of that work was almost burned away like a mist. I felt more spacious and more free.

[Steve] And how can people get in touch with you if they'd like to help bring this to pass — the center and the whole project you're describing?

[Justin] Yeah, the best way to get in touch is to email us or check out our website, YangtiYoga.com. We already have a lot of online programs. We're building, building, creating community, Sangha. A lot of people are interested, and it's just really about waiting for the right causes and conditions to come together. We

welcome people to reach out and learn more.

[Dr. Nida] My wish is a place really specialized — a specialized retreat place. Maybe we don't need many rooms, but if there are even a few rooms, then people can come frequently. A really specialized place, with all facilities, a personal guide. In that retreat you cannot cook by yourself — somebody brings the food and everything. That's why I gave it the name Yangti Yoga: really focused and specialized.

In the Tantra they say five perfections. In order to give perfect teachings, we need a perfect place, location. So I think this kind of professional place is really important. And also, safety — even spiritual practice, safety is important. Health is always number one.

I wish that most Buddhist centers have doctors — Ayurvedic doctors, TCM doctors, or Sowa Rigpa doctors, or maybe psychologists. If our spiritual tradition is more connected with medical science, then we are on the safer side.

Yutok's main teaching says that over 70 or 80 percent of his profession was being a doctor. He said: "As a doctor, I can help people directly." But because his students really wanted Dharma practice too, he gave them the Yutok Nyingthig Dharma practice. But then he says: with Dharma practice, you can't escape from hells — you need the "kärsel," eliminating obstacles. An entire chapter about that. And in the 15th century, the great master Surkar Nyamnye Dorje, considered one of Yutok's reincarnations, at ten years old had a vision of Yutok. And Yutok said to him: "Now is your time. I want you to check the four medical tantras — some doctors have messed them up. Please reclaim them." And also to give teachings on the Yutok Nyingthig. His commentary on the medical chapter of the Kärsel became a big book — about 700 pages.

I hope in Buddhism in general, especially in Tibetan Buddhist centers, studying at least partially these topics would be very beneficial.

The Yutok Nyingthig Kärsel tradition has a whole chapter with 15 sections talking about all kinds of mental, physical, and energetic disturbances according to Tibetan medicine — what kind of problems you can have during meditation and visions, not only dark retreat but also other kinds of meditations. And how to treat them — with diet, lifestyle, external therapy, and medicine.

Yutok said in the 12th century: future people get busier and lazier, and they are less courageous about spiritual practice. One word he says: future people, they see a very thick spiritual book — what do they do? They escape. "This is too much for me." Isn't it true?

That's why also, the classical Ngöndro is for six months. For us lay people, to find six months to do a solitary retreat — that's spiritual stress, spiritual pressure. But seven days — normally when I say Ngöndro, I'm talking about seven days. If somebody says "I can't do six months of Ngöndro," I can understand, that's realistic. What I suggest is: seven days in a group if you are completely new — then you know how to do the practice. And then another seven days by yourself. The group experience and your own experience are a little bit different. In the group, you are supported by the teacher, collective energy, collective experiences. But when you do it by yourself, it's your personal experience. So I normally suggest two Ngöndros: one in a group, one by yourself.

When people ask me about dark retreat, I first ask them: "Maybe you should do Ngöndro." I call it the "Ngöndro reaction." When someone says, "Ngöndro? Too much, too hard — I'm advanced, I'm not a beginner," then I see something is wrong. But when someone says, "Oh, I love Ngöndro, I want to repeat it again," then I know they're humble, ready, good base.

Patrul Rinpoche was a highly qualified Dzogpa Chenpo and Mahamudra practitioner, and he did this classical Ngöndro more than 25 times — every year, six months of Ngöndro retreat, for 25 years. That's a lot. And the founder of the Drikung Kagyu, Jigten Sumgön, says: "If you really understand, the Ngöndro is more profound than the actual other practices."

The Ngöndro, when we talk about refuge, you find your direction. The four immeasurables and bodhicitta make us more human, more connected. What makes humans happy? Connections. What is the best connection? Not fear, not anger, not jealousy, not confusion — but kindness, love, equanimity. The four immeasurables have the power to open your heart and be connected.

Vajrasattva is very much working on ourselves — remembering what kind of negative karma, negative accumulations, traumas, dramas we hold. You clean yourself, wash yourself. Prostrations and circumambulation are physical purging and exercise. Mandala offering is generosity. And Kusali, letting your body go — our most powerful attachment is our own body, and we are able to let it go as offering.

If you really understand the meanings of Ngöndro and do it, spiritually you are changed and transformed. You build a very healthy base for other spiritual practices. Without a stable Ngöndro base, you think "I'm doing deity yoga, I'm the deity, I'm special, others are not." But if your heart is trained with bodhicitta, what you see in yourself you see in others too. If you are the deity, others are deities too.

[Steve] Do you recognize those two extremes? On one hand, somebody desperate to get enlightened, always thinking of the next thing — "I'll do my Ngöndro so I can get the initiation." That hunger for enlightenment. On the other hand, a person who says "I'm going to simply do whatever practice I'm doing" — but in a way that can be stagnant. There isn't energy there. Ngöndro is a famous place of stagnation. People say "I'm still doing my Ngöndro." What advice do you have?

[Dr. Nida] It's not your imagination, it's true. I call it the "Ngöndro trauma." Many people are traumatized. "I'm not finishing 100,000 prostrations, I'm struggling, my life is so busy." I really see that as spiritual trauma.

That's why I like the Yutok Nyingthig Ngöndro — seven days of practice. When I say seven days, people say "Nida is creating a new easy style." When I wrote "Karma Mudra Joy," they said "Sex sells, he wrote a book about sex." I think it's fine what people say, the criticisms. But my answer is not to prove myself. For example, these commentaries I write in Tibetan — if you want to criticize me, read my book in Tibetan and we can debate or discuss. Keeping the authentic practice is very important for me. And the only way to bring it out authentically was to put it in Tibetan.

[Justin] There's this expression: "Practice slowly, arrive quickly." Giving ourselves some time to slow down feels very counterintuitive, especially in places like the United States where we are so fast. But the more we are able to ask ourselves these questions... And similarly for the person who finds themselves stagnant, being overly humble — asking questions around "what is my experience like? Why am I experiencing blockages? What do I really need?" and really listening. I think most people will naturally course correct if they can have a much more subtle, blended relationship to practice and not treat it like a product.

It's the union of the medical approach and spiritual practice, creating a really integrated way of practicing. But it requires that people actually sit down and listen to themselves and ask themselves questions and be uncomfortable sometimes.

[Dr. Nida] Sometimes it's not only the student's issue. The teacher says "do Ngöndro, then I will give you teaching." They do it wishing to get the next teaching. And maybe they're not ready — told to do it again. That's what I was saying: some teachers always doubt the capacity of students. Instead of analyzing why they're not ready, maybe they need more psychological work too. Just traditional way — the poor disciples did it three times, 100,000 practices, and maybe the teacher says "still not ready." I think we need to find the balance.

In the tradition, Ngöndro is a psychotherapy. But today people don't see Ngöndro as psychotherapy. Maybe they need modern psychotherapy too.

And those who rush — "I want to get enlightened, give me the strongest mantra, the most powerful meditation" — normally those people are escaping from reality. It's a psychological issue. They know there's something wrong in their life. They want to prove to their parents they're good enough, prove to their friends. "In my life I'm a loser, but in spiritual practice I'm a winner." We have to find the spiritual and psychological balance.

Maybe with practice, if they realize something is happening for themselves and try to deal with that first, then they come back into the practice. Every individual case is different. We need a clearer understanding. The communication between teacher and disciples is important. It's fixable.

[Steve] Thank you both very much.

[Justin] Yeah, thank you.

[Steve] Thank you for listening to another Guru Viking podcast. For more interviews like these, as well as articles, videos, and guided meditations, visit www.guruviking.com.