

Lama Yeshe

BECOMING
THE TANTRIC PATH OF PURIFICATION
VAJRASATTVA



foreword by

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7- Getting Ready for Retreat

QUALIFICATIONS FOR RETREAT

WHAT QUALIFICATIONS ARE NECESSARY for a person to retreat on the maha-anuttara yoga tantra aspect of Vajrasattva? The basic requirement is that you must be a serious, sincere practitioner, free from hypocrisy and enthusiastically determined to attain the everlasting peaceful realization of enlightenment. You should be practicing what your teacher has shown you—not a misinterpretation projected by your own mind.

In the experience of yogis and yoginis in the Tibetan tradition, it is necessary that, as a general qualification, you have received teachings on the graduated path to enlightenment in a perfect manner and have put them into practice. As a specific qualification, you must have received initiation into the maha-anuttara yoga tantra aspect of Vajrasattva. If you are so qualified, it is possible for you to actualize this practice.

The reason that knowledge and experience of the graduated path to enlightenment are essential is that the three principal aspects of the path—renunciation, bodhichitta, and correct understanding of shunyata—are indispensable prerequisites for the attainment of tantric realizations. Without them your practice of the yoga method will not be effective. It will remain superficial and intellectual, and it will never become one with your mind. If on this basis you receive the necessary initiation from a perfectly qualified master, you are fully equipped to make a successful retreat on Heruka Vajrasattva, and you are most fortunate.

WHERE TO RETREAT

Where should a properly qualified person retreat? Not just any place will do. The ideal place to retreat is one that gives you a sense of reality, not one that is a big hallucination, a polluted projection of the deluded mind.

Sometimes we are unwise; we try to meditate in a place that's like a furnace and complain when we can no longer stand the heat. A fire's nature is to

burn, so if you stick your finger into a fire, then it'll get burned. It's up to you to choose the appropriate mandala for the way in which you want to develop—just like you should choose shoes that fit your feet!

Of course, if you have great mind control, you can retreat anywhere; your controlled vibration will even affect others. But if you are weak, the uncontrolled vibrations of others will affect you; your small candlelight of wisdom will be blown out. In retreat we try to gain control over our minds—but we are babies with a long way to go. Baby minds need ideal conditions. Actually, our minds are worse than those of babies. Babies grasp at whatever they see, but we not only grasp at things we see, we intellectualize about them as well. As our wisdom is limited, we must put ourselves in the right environment. If our minds were free from confusion, we would have no need to worry about the environment; we wouldn't even need to retreat on Vajrasattva.

It is very important to think carefully about the place in which you are putting yourself—not only where you are going to retreat, but also where you are going to live. Decide what you want to learn, and live near where you can be taught. In Western cities you can choose your environment quite easily. If you want to spend your time at the movies, you can live near a cinema. You have the freedom to do that. In other words, you have some control over your karma, the way your life develops. You are not powerless; through your choices, you create your karma. If you want to retreat, you arrange the circumstances accordingly. That is creating karma.

In the lamas' experience, the ideal place is a beautiful, natural environment where the atmosphere is quiet, peaceful, and relaxed. You can see snowy mountains, and there are wild flowers, medicinal plants, pleasing, natural smells, and fresh, clean water. Avoid places that are dirty, close to roads, traffic, and people. Environments that are dangerous and those where poisonous plants grow should also be avoided. Do not retreat in a place where you automatically feel insecure and nervous.

Places where holy beings live are excellent: they have a good vibration that I am sure Westerners, who are very sensitive, can feel. Such ideal places are usually very isolated. In Tibet we used to study in the monasteries and qualify for retreats as explained above, and then go to an isolated place to meditate. These places were extremely simple, not like the Western luxury "retreats" to which rich people escape when they do not want to meet anybody. Westerners really know how to enjoy themselves, even in isolation! However it is all done out of self-cherishing. Ascetics' retreats are exactly the opposite. Many Tibetan yogis would abandon the world for years—or even

a lifetime—in order to ensure the perfect retreat conditions. Some even sealed themselves into doorless caves, receiving food through a small hole in the wall. You can also retreat in a monastery or at a Dharma center. In the East many meditators used to retreat near cemeteries. Such places are usually quiet. You build your hut away from the part of the cemetery frequented by visitors and, with deep understanding of impermanence and death, retreat.

So choose carefully. The best place is one in which you feel secure in the knowledge that from beginning to end, there will be no distractions. Of course there is no real security in our samsaric lives, but somehow you should feel that the place you have chosen is as good as it is possible to find and that you will be able to retreat there effectively.

WHEN TO START RETREAT

Generally, the type and purpose of a retreat determine its starting time. Since Heruka Vajrasattva is a mother tantra, a retreat on this deity should start on the tenth or the twenty-fifth of the Tibetan month. These are auspicious dates for tantric yoga, when there is much movement of the dakas and dakinis and your nervous system can easily be blessed. Because of the intensity of the daka-dakini energy at those times, you can discover everlasting blissful energy within the chakras of your nervous system simply by starting on either of these days. For the same reason, it is best to start retreats on deities of the mother tantra class in the evening after sunset.

SOME GENERAL PREPARATIONS

If you are doing retreat alone, you may need someone to help with the shopping and cooking. Your helper should be totally positive toward you and what you are doing, and you should have a good relationship with this person. If your helper thinks that you are ridiculous or that what you are doing is evil, it will be a great disturbance to your mind. Similarly, if you are retreating with a group, it should not include people with whom you cannot get along. It is important that you create the best possible conditions for your retreat.

If you don't have a helper and are not in a group retreat where eating arrangements are usually made for you, you should try to obtain most of the food you'll need for the duration of your retreat beforehand. Don't get too much; rather, limit yourself to basic things. This is what we used to do in Tibet.

Before starting retreat you should cut your connections with the outside world and abandon whatever expectations you have of it. Although you are retreating in order to cut off your ignorance, this internal separation is a gradual process that begins with detaching yourself from the outside world. You must finish all your letter writing and other business before you begin, otherwise your retreat will constantly be disturbed by distracting thoughts of, “I have to do this,” “I really should do that....” Even if a beautiful present arrives, you should not accept it until the retreat has finished. Make sure that while your body is in the retreat room, your mind doesn’t wander back home.

You should do your retreat as strictly as possible, continuously keeping your mind in the sphere of the transcendental process. Sitting in a cave while your mind keeps wandering back home is not being in retreat. Your body, speech, and mind should be focused on the same thing. Most of the time your mind is split and agitated, and you cannot do mundane things without coming down from a state of higher awareness. In retreat you must learn how to unify the two—the mundane and the transcendent.

Before your retreat starts you must decide who you will allow yourself to meet and how far from the place of retreat you can go. Thus you might decide, “During this retreat I shall talk to my parents but no one else,” or, “During this retreat I shall go as far as the spring to wash but no further.” Such decisions are very helpful for your mind. In Tibetan we call it *tsam war gyu* (“putting retreat”), which means you’ll meet certain people if necessary, but no others. Even if your best friend turns up unexpectedly, you should not meet him or her. The more outside people you meet, the more samsaric information you collect, and you gain mental pollution instead of wisdom. It is best not to talk to even the other people in your retreat until lunchtime, and then the conversation should be only about Dharma—not all your past experiences, future plans, or other gossip. If you are feeling very tense and need to talk to relax, as a kind of therapy, perhaps that is acceptable, but you should be careful not to waste your own energy or that of others. If there is something urgent or important to say, you can write a note.

You should be careful about what you read in retreat and avoid all samsaric literature completely: newspapers, magazines, novels, technical books, poetry, and astrological charts. Even certain Dharma books should be avoided during retreat. Those that deal with philosophical doctrine are too dry and may only add to your confusion and superstitions instead of enhancing the psychological process that retreat is supposed to be. You can read books on the graduated path or commentaries on the yoga method; however, even these should

not be read too much. Read only books that help you. Doing glance meditation on the graduated path during the breaks is especially useful because it directs your energy into the right channel. Sometimes in retreat your mind can veer toward extremes; the graduated path can bring you back to center.

One of the most important preparations is your determination to succeed. You should feel, “I am so fortunate to have this perfect human life in which I have the opportunity to receive the everlasting blissful realizations of Heruka Vajrasattva. Therefore no matter what samsaric experiences I have during this retreat, be they good or bad, I shall control my mind.” Thus whether you experience samsaric happiness or difficulties, you do not overreact but take the middle way.

For example, one morning you might wake up with a headache and think that you are too sick to go to the session. A little headache won’t kill you! You are here for retreat. That means you have to exercise control. You can meditate with a headache. Or perhaps a beautiful, ego-breaking present from your parents suddenly arrives, and you lose control and get very excited: “Wow! I’ve been waiting for this for more than a year; I must take it right away.” You should not do this. Do not get excited. It doesn’t matter; have control.

WHAT TO EAT

One of the most important things you can do to ensure the success of your retreat is to stay healthy. Some people think, “Oh, I’m doing Dharma; I don’t need anything.” That’s wrong. When you’re in retreat trying to develop Dharma wisdom, it makes more sense to feed yourself even better than you normally do—and you know how much you usually need to take care of your samsaric body. Some people equate retreat with what they imagine to be asceticism: uncomfortable conditions, an unhealthy environment, poor food, feeling hungry and thirsty, not sleeping, wearing rags, and so forth. This is completely wrong. First, these are not the signs of asceticism. Second, tantric yoga has the methods of transforming all pleasures and comforts into the rapid path to enlightenment. Therefore, as long as you can use it wisely, you can have whatever you like. You should stay in a clean, healthy place, have a beautiful blissful room, a comfortable seat, a good place to sleep, and plenty of good food. Treat yourself with respect—after all, you are Heruka Vajrasattva! Offer yourself nice clothes and eat well.

This does not mean you should overeat. When you are doing a kriya tantra retreat, the food restrictions are quite inflexible. In a highest yoga tantra

retreat you have a bit more latitude but should still avoid what we call “black” foods—meat (especially chicken, pork, and fish), eggs, garlic, onions, and radish. Garlic is very heavy and disturbs your nervous system either by making it feel too full or by causing too much movement within it. If the onions are not too strong, they’re probably okay. The problem with radish is that it causes gas and makes you break wind. Fruit and vegetables are good, as are so-called “white” foods like milk, yogurt, and cheese, which are considered pure. The food you eat should be clean and healthy. You should not accept food from people suffering from contagious diseases, like tuberculosis. You can also have muesli, chocolate, and even Vegemite, which, despite its color, is not a black food! Some people like to fast during retreat; however, in a long retreat you should fast with moderation.

If you do not eat properly, there is the danger that your nervous system and the energy winds of your body will become disturbed. A strong retreat itself has the tendency to do this, and a poor diet compounds the risk. Such disturbances manifest as nervous breakdowns, “spacing out,” or physical pains, especially in the heart chakra. Sometimes you will get pain in the heart because your visualization of the nectar that rushes down from Vajrasattva’s heart into your central channel is too concrete. You are concentrating strongly at your heart and think that something physical is hitting it. This is a fundamental error, but it is much easier to develop such symptoms if you do not take care of your health.

Sometimes retreaters experience so much bliss and joy in a session that they want to keep going without food. This is the baby mind speaking—don’t trust it. Take your meals as scheduled. While breakfast and lunch are fine, there’s a question about whether or not you should eat dinner. It’s better to avoid eating in the evening because a full stomach impairs concentration. It depends on the individual—we’re all different. Some people can eat only a little at a time; for them, I’d say dinner is okay. Those who can manage a good breakfast and lunch should keep the evening meal very light or, preferably, skip it altogether. Be flexible; food is not all that important. Just stay healthy.

Sometimes people take the eight Mahayana precepts during retreat.⁸ On those days, of course, you can’t have breakfast or dinner. You can choose whether to take them every day or not; it’s up to you. In my opinion the best days to take them are the full and new moon days. Taking precepts gives you great energy and is another excellent way of taking action to purify yourself.

CLEANING THE RETREAT PLACE

Since you are going to clean yourself inside, you should also clean your external environment. To give yourself the best chance of success you must keep environmental distractions to a minimum. You have to create an environment that suits your needs. When you do worldly business, you set up your office in a certain way. Since your business is now retreat, you should act accordingly.

The meditation room should be comfortable, clean, and very tidy. Do not leave things lying all over the place; their disorderly vibration will agitate your mind. Nor should you distract your mind by having objects of attachment in your room. No animals, including dogs, should be allowed to enter. After cleaning your room you can sprinkle it with saffron, sandalwood, rose water, or any other kind of perfume. Instead of putting perfume on your body with attachment, put it around the retreat room—just walking into the room becomes a completely blissful experience. You should also sprinkle some blessed inner-offering nectar around the room. This should all be done before you start retreat and then again every morning. Similarly, the room in which you sleep should not be decorated with pictures or other objects that stimulate your delusions.

THE MEDITATION SEAT

The next thing to do is arrange your meditation seat. It should be as comfortable as possible; you should feel as though you could sit there for twenty-four hours without a break, experiencing only bliss. The seat should not be flat; rather, you should have a small pillow beneath your buttocks, making them higher than your knees. This will help you keep your back straight and prevent you from getting pins and needles in your legs. A thin, lumpy, uncomfortable seat does not necessarily signify renunciation.

Beneath the seat there should be a right-pointing swastika drawn on the floor in chalk or rice, or on a piece of paper. The swastika is an ancient Indian symbol of auspiciousness. The word comes from the Sanskrit *svasti*, which means well-being. It also symbolizes the indestructible, or *vajra*, seat that Buddha sat upon at Bodhgaya when he became enlightened. The buddhas of this fortunate eon attain enlightenment at Bodhgaya. Since we ourselves are retreating in order to reach enlightenment, we too should have a vajra seat, not an up-and-down, here-today-gone-tomorrow, yo-yo seat. If you're in a boat, you follow the rise and fall of the ocean's movement. Your meditation

seat should not be like that. Since we cannot put an actual vajra beneath our seat, we use this symbolic representation. The combination of an indestructible seat with an indestructible, pure, enlightened attitude makes your retreat really worthwhile.

You can also put two kinds of grass under your seat. One is *kusha* grass, the grass that some Indian brooms are made of. Two bits of this can be arranged so that their tips point toward the center of the swastika from the back, their stems pointing backward. At Bodhgaya, Buddha sat on a cushion of kusha grass. Using the same grass reminds us of Lord Buddha's meditation experiences, especially his decision to remain seated on that grass until he reached enlightenment, no matter how difficult it was or how many hardships he had to bear. Kusha grass is composed of hundreds of slender strands, all lying parallel, orderly, close together, and pointing the one way. It symbolizes strong, single-pointed concentration and clear visualization—all your energy flowing in one direction.

The other kind of grass is called *tsadurwa* in Tibetan; it is like couch or *kikuyu* grass. This is arranged in the same way as the kusha grass, two bits pointing in toward the center of the swastika from the back. The pieces you choose should have as many joints as possible. This type of grass is considered auspicious for a long life.

Once you have arranged your seat, you should not move it for any reason. Westerners always want to shake out their cushions or leave them in the sun, but in retreat this is not allowed. Do not move your seat to another part of the room once the retreat has started. You have to control your schizophrenic mind.

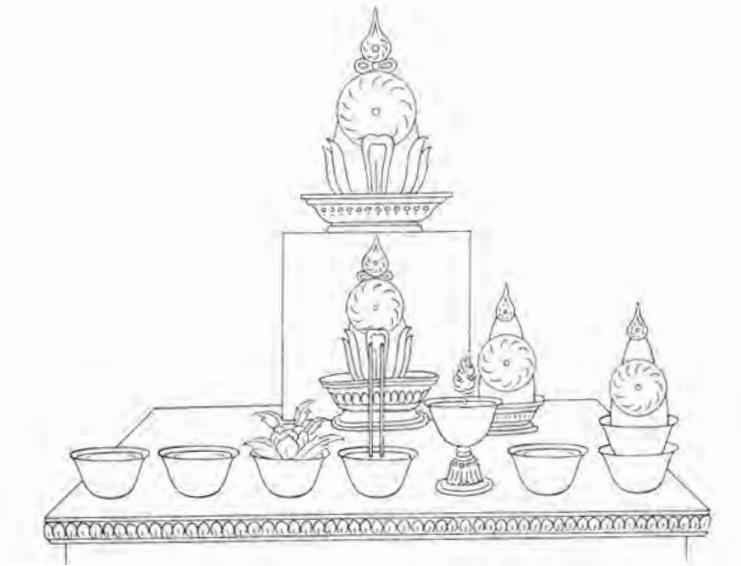
In a group retreat there should be plenty of space between one person and the next. You don't have to squash up like Tibetans in puja. I remember a student once having trouble because he put his seat on a damp section of the floor, and his small carpet became moldy and rotted. Therefore it is important to be careful at the beginning, when you are first deciding where to put your seat.

At home you should also try to have a special meditation seat, preferably not in your bedroom, which tends to have a strong samsaric vibration. If you can set up a shrine in a separate room or in a quiet corner of your house and use it only for meditation, it will help you a lot. The Dharma trip and the samsara trip are completely different—unless you have a great realization of bodhichitta, they don't go together at all.

In front of you there should be a small table for your vajra (*dorje*), bell (*drilbu*), damaru drum, kapala, and, if you need it, sadhana text. The kapala contains the inner-offering liquid, which is usually black tea with a special, blessed inner-offering pill dissolved in it. However in a group retreat it is not necessary for everyone to have these things. It's enough if just one or two of the retreaters have them. If you don't have an actual dorje and bell, a drawing of them will do.

THE ROSARY

You should have a special rosary that you use only in retreats and do not allow other people to see. This rosary should be treated with great respect. Some retreats require you to use a rosary made of bone or some other specific substance. It should not be worn around your wrist or neck, and once the retreat has started, it should not be taken out of the room—leave it on your table. You must never take your rosary into the bathroom. Before the retreat starts, the rosary should be blessed by a lama, and each morning, at the beginning of the first session, you should bless it with the mantra OM RUTSIRA MANI PRAWA TAYA HUM. Say this mantra seven times and blow on the rosary.



How to arrange the altar

ARRANGING THE ALTAR

After you have cleaned the room, arrange your altar. Put your image of Heruka Vajrasattva on the altar, or, if it is a picture, hang it on the wall above. You should not put other images on your altar. During this retreat Heruka Vajrasattva is the most important deity—your manifestation of universal reality. You don't need any others.

Ideally you should use three different offering cakes (*tormas*).⁹ In Tibet we used to make these out of roasted barley flour (*tsampa*), but in the West you can use chocolate, candy, biscuits, cake, or other foods instead.

The main torma (shown at the top) is your offering to Heruka Vajrasattva. You bless it with the blissful transcendental wisdom of Vajrasattva through the methods of tantric yoga. Leave it on your altar until the end of your retreat.¹⁰ When this torma is made of *tsampa*, a little alcohol is usually added, which by its nature has the energy of expansion and development. This symbolizes the meditator's development of kundalini energy through the yoga method.¹¹ The second torma (shown immediately below the first) is for the special wrathful protector of Heruka, who pacifies all uncontrolled energy. Once you place it on your altar, you should not remove it until you have finished your retreat.¹²

No matter where you retreat, there will be local deities, or spirits (*shi-dak*), who possess or control that place. To prevent them from taking offense at your intrusion and causing you harm, it is necessary to make an offering to them. Again, this does not have to be a Tibetan torma (as shown just to the right of the second torma above) but can be rice or any of the other things mentioned before. It also stays on your altar for the duration of your retreat.¹³ Visualize your offering as whatever those sentient beings would need and enjoy, and feel that you are also offering your body and speech to these beings, sacrificing yourself for the sake of *all* sentient beings.

As you make the offering think, "Please let me do here what I have to do: purify myself and gain wisdom and compassion for the sake of all sentient beings. I am not trying to take this place away from you; I am just using it for a short time. Therefore please do not worry or be angry, jealous, or afraid. Please have compassion, help me, and do not interfere. Take this offering and anything else you need." Visualize that the spirits take the offering, are very happy and satisfied, and give you permission to use the place in safety. In the Hinayana sutras Buddha explained that before a monastery is built permission should be sought from the spirits who own the land, trees, and

other things at that place. Without these offerings, the spirits may get angry and harm us physically or mentally.

Offering bowls, candles, butter lamps or other light offerings, flowers, and food should also be placed on your altar. Change the water and make fresh light and incense offerings before each session. The light you offer symbolizes the inner light of wisdom that you are trying to develop; incense represents your pure morality.

Why do we offer so much water? It's not because Vajrasattva is always thirsty; there's no such thing as a deity actually taking your offerings. No, the problem is our miserliness. We usually give with the spirit of attachment; this sneaky spirit is somehow completely unified with our gift. Water is so freely available that when you offer it, you don't grasp at it, and in this way you get used to giving without attachment or expectation. Therefore offering water is very useful: it costs you nothing, and you get great benefit for just a little work. Also, water has many precious qualities and contains the energy of all kinds of precious jewels.¹⁴ Bless the water you offer with the mantra OM AH HUM, which symbolizes Vajrasattva's enlightened body, speech, and mind. Although it looks like you're putting water on your altar, because of the blessed transformation, you are actually offering the blissful nectar of transcendental wisdom and compassion.

As I mentioned before, it is highly beneficial to make physical offerings as often as you can. The lazy mind will say, "Real offerings are internal; I don't need to go through the ritual of making all these external offerings on the altar." Don't be fooled by laziness—it is much better for you to engage in the action of giving. The only exception to this is if you are completely in samadhi. Spending your time absorbed in single-pointed concentration may be more important. When you have plenty of time to do other things but no time to make a decent altar, it shows how misconceived your samsaric value judgments really are.

A small portion of your food or drink should be blessed and offered on the altar before you take it yourself. Offer a little of your morning tea in a small bowl and a portion of your lunch on a plate. This is very useful for loosening attachment and developing the perfection of generosity.

At the end of the day, the food you have offered can be taken off the altar and eaten the next day. You do not have to restrict your offerings to the material ones I have been talking about. You can transform them mentally into infinite offerings of the best kinds of nectar, flowers, incense, lights, perfumes, food, sound, and so forth. Along with these, offer everything else in

the universe transformed into sublime blissful offerings, as we do when we offer a mandala.

There are many disciplines that help preserve the pure energy of retreat. You shouldn't take things in and out of the meditation room, especially your rosary and ritual implements, such as your vajra and bell. Animals and those not in retreat should not enter the meditation room. No one else should sleep in your bed or sit on your meditation seat. You cannot take your seat outside to air or clean it; all you can do is brush it off. You should not touch weapons or put knives, arrows, and so forth in your mouth. You should not use others' plates, cups, and cutlery or allow them to use yours. And one of the worst things you can do is to fight with other members of the group. That really breaks the retreat.

There are also many things that you can do during retreat. In a group, "karma yoga" is good. Each person has a little work to do, helping the Dharma center or serving the other members. All this should be worked out before the retreat starts and rosters drawn up so that everyone knows what his or her job is. People are needed to clean the meditation room and arrange the altar before each session. Help may be needed in the kitchen or with serving food. Some people might like to do gardening. Others might like to transcribe tapes or edit teachings for publication. These activities are good and help keep you balanced, but while doing them, you must maintain the mindfulness that I have already described.

During the breaks you can also do other practices: your daily commitments, prostrations, and so forth. You can also recite Vajrasattva mantras, but remember, these don't count toward your retreat total.

All these practices may not be the most important thing you can do, but they are very useful in your spiritual development.