

Eight Steps to Take Into the New Year

Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche

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by

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To those sitting right in front of me, good evening to all of you—and good afternoon to some of you, good morning to many of you, and to all of you, Happy New Year.

This wonderful technology enables us to see and speak with you all directly. And since many of your sangha friends are here with me, all of us at Mindrolling would like to begin by wishing everyone, from our hearts, a most wonderful, happy, harmonious, and auspicious 2017.

We hope that this year will be filled with good health, happiness, and peace—and especially deepened practice, for those of us working with the dharma practices. So, what else could we mention on this New Year's Day?

What I feel the New Year gives us is an opportunity to start something new. It gives us an opportunity to look forward to the coming year with even greater aspirations for all possible goodness. And, especially as many of us have had a very intensive year, it provides us with the opportunity to renew our outlook, our inspiration, our courage and hope.

The various years have their highs and lows, with some years being much quieter and simpler. But I think it is fair to say—and as many of you have written—for many of us around the world, 2016 has been a very intensive year.

I think the word “intensive” is very, very apt in many ways. In one sense, many wonderful things happened this year, especially for vajrayana buddhist practitioners. We celebrated Guru Rinpoche’s year in this Year of the Monkey, and the Monkey Year is always filled with many wonderful events throughout the Buddhist world. Mindrolling, too, has been filled with wonderful ceremonies and events, many of which were participated in by our friends from around the world. So in one sense, I would say this has been a year filled with many teachings, practices, pilgrimages, and ceremonies, and much effort put into retreat and the study and practice of dharma. I think we can look back on 2016 as an exhaustive year of aspirations and effort in practice.

Within the mundane world, however, it has also been a very interesting and intensive year, with a lot of upheavals. The situation that we have around the world is not necessarily a nice one, what with so much violence, and hatred, and biases, and discrimination. In 2016, many such events have shaken us all with so much sadness and grief.

Politically, it has been a very interesting and intensive year, not only in the western world, but also in the eastern world—and we are still going through it. With all the political situations happening, especially in the United States, many emails and messages came in during the last two or three months while I was in retreat. Many of you were asking about how to relate to this kind of year; how to relate to the many changes we all face; and how to relate to events that are not necessarily what we expected or would like them to be. As practitioners, how should we look at these situations? What kind of attitude should we have towards them?

Being in retreat, I didn’t have much freedom to write about this. Secondly, I intentionally didn’t write too much. This was because I’ve known many of you to be very dedicated, devoted students of the dharma who, throughout the year and throughout your lives, have had wonderful opportunities to receive teachings from many great teachers. You have heard, learned, studied, and understood many teachings. As dharma practitioners, what more could we really add to any particular situation, whatever it may be?

Situations may be extraordinarily good and as we expect them to be or *not* as we expect them to be, in terms of challenges, or sadness, or grief. But no one situation or question has a different answer or approach. The teachings that we have heard, understood, and reflected upon apply to every situation.

Dharma: A Unified View

It is very important to view each situation from the point of view of Dharma, and it is of utmost importance to view it *correctly* from that point of view.

*We must always examine the cause
and not fall into dejection or anger about the result.*

The Buddha taught that the ignorant always look to the fruition, or result; the wise always look to its cause. When we apply compassion, for example, the foolish will be motivated by a particular outcome, or resultant situation; the wise will have compassion for its cause.

And so it is when we find ourselves, or the world around us, facing certain challenges. We must always examine the cause and not fall into dejection or anger about the result. When the cause is seen clearly, compassion and wisdom can arise unimpededly—and then there is no situation that cannot be brought to the path of practice.

Dharma is one unified view, with the potential to accommodate and apply to any situation. This is the perspective from which we need to look at things. This is the perspective we must keep reminding ourselves of.

Interestingly enough, for people in the buddhist world—and in all spiritual fields, but I am speaking here to the buddhist community—social activism and buddhist ideologies are very strong. Kindness, compassion, awareness, and having the courage to really go forward with ethics and principles in this life are very strong. And so as practitioners and as citizens of your various countries, many Buddhists are very connected to social activism, and to the various projects and organizations, especially non-profit organizations, that work towards helping others, that work towards the services. This is wonderful. This is really something that can bridge the gap between view and action.

It is *because* of this background that practitioners tend to feel even more strongly the impact of the situations happening around the world. Because we are aware, our awareness tends to magnify these situations. We feel very strongly about them, and from that perspective, our questions about how to relate to these global situations were very strongly put.

Especially when we hear about racism and violence, or the many terrorist attacks happening around the world; when we see results of elections, and countries voting to exit or to stay—how does a practitioner relate to such situations? How can we find in

our minds a way to be peaceful with whatever is happening in the world? Should we say or do something against it? Should we be patient with the situation? How should we look at it? I received many, many such messages.

And in reading and thinking about all these messages, what I found again and again was the absence of two important things, namely impermanence and interdependence. These are two things that practitioners, especially, all need to keep in mind.

Impermanence

When you feel very strongly about situations, whether good or especially when bad, one of the most important things a practitioner must keep in mind is impermanence, or change. In many of those letters, when pouring your hearts out in those questions, there was the weaker perspective of seeing certain events or experiences as being tremendously more solid or prominent than they are.

All the teachings and practices of dharma, however, emphasize the need to keep impermanence in mind. Just as any good thing will pass into something else, any negative event, no matter how difficult or not in accord with our expectations and aspirations, will pass. A practitioner's perspective must be from the standpoint of stepping back a bit. Without becoming so immersed or drowned in things, just step a little bit back and keep in mind what the Buddha always taught: 'This shall also pass.

This will pass: rather than being a passive approach is an understanding of the impermanence of any moment, event, or experience. It allows us to look at things from a broader, much vaster perspective, rather than linearly pinpointing any one situation. That one situation will then no longer envelop or overshadow life's bigger picture—or the many good things that can come from even negative situations, unfortunate as they may be.

So, one suggestion I might make is to always keep in mind that whatever you experience will also pass. Yes, it may be very impactful but it will pass; it, too, is impermanent. The cycling of world and samsara is such that everything is in constant movement. Everything has a momentum and is constantly changing and transforming. So keep impermanence in mind and trust the blessings of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas in every situation, especially the difficult ones.

Interdependence

The second point that I felt was missing in many of your letters was an understanding of interdependence. Just as important as impermanence, the understanding of interdependence is an integral aspect of the buddhist view.

*This is how all things come into being: everything has a cause
and the cause is something we all participate in.*

Whatever we experience comes into being because of many different situations. We are all interconnected, and the interdependence of everything brings about all the various situations and events we experience, individually and globally. Therefore, no one person, event, or single situation can be completely blamed for anything. There are so many reasons, so many factors happening all the time. Their interdependence then brings to fruition events that could be the result of many years or even lifetimes of karmic causes, which we have all created and participated in.

This is what practitioners should keep in mind when we speak or think about something. Whatever the pain, grief, or unhappiness—or happiness, joy, and goodness—we experience, there should be a sense of the pervasive view of interdependent origination. This is how all things come into being: everything has a cause and the cause is something we all participate in.

It is always convenient to blame one person or one situation or one experience or event. But if we look carefully from dharma's perspective, there is no one thing we can blame as the only reason why certain things happen.

So, do keep in mind both impermanence and interdependence: two truths that the Buddha always taught. Then, we can look forward to the future knowing that change *will* happen, because change always happens; and perhaps that change can be made into something that is freer of ignorance, freer of anger, freer of all negativities. Moreover, since all things come into being because of interdependence, we should become even more aware—based on the experience and knowledge of the past—of how we can make things better *now*. In this way, we can all participate together to really bring about a better year and a better future, especially for the next generation.

Many of the things we are becoming more aware of now may not even yield results within in our lifetime, but they may for the next generation. As the world continues on, this is what we are responsible for. And for this, we need greater strength. If we have learned anything from the past year, it is the need for greater emphasis, greater effort, greater hope, and greater courage put into making things better, and planting seeds that bring a sense of the creation of goodness.

*The one area where we probably need to work much harder
is in creating more good people: simply good.*

At this point, there are so many good things in the world already. We already have a lot of good, learned people; we have a lot of powerful people, wealthy people, and a

lot of wise people. The one area where we probably need to work much harder is in creating more *good* people: simply good. If we could all just truly emphasize developing a good heart, a kind and genuine good heart, that is what the world would most benefit from. This is the way we can right what we feel is wrong, and in this way we can continue strengthening the good everywhere, on an individual and collective level.

Basic goodness is the human potential for genuine kindness and goodness. It is physical actions that are kind and good; it is verbally speaking in a way that is kind and good; and it is training your mind to generate good thoughts and have harmony within. From the base of harmony within, you can share and contribute to the harmony of the others and the environment. This is the responsibility I think we all need to become aware of and commit to.

Other than that, this past Monkey Year, which was celebrated as Guru Rinpoche's year, truly seems to have been a year designed by Guru Rinpoche, himself. Both Jetsunla and I were thinking that, if ever there were a year that encouraged us to wake up to the chaos we can create within and outside of ourselves, this was it. This year we saw the good we can create and the amount of practice we can actually do; and we saw the chaos and confusion we can create in a world. I think that Guru Rinpoche, through his blessings and presence, really presented that to all of us clearly. And so, it was a year filled with the reminder of Guru Rinpoche and his teachings. If nothing else, what we need to learn from that is to commit ourselves to the practice of dharma even more so.

Remembering the Relevance of the View

A few days ago, I overheard some of the young monks and nuns arguing. It was nothing big, just a general argument between these two groups. As I passed by, I heard one of the senior nuns saying to the younger ones, "Here you are arguing with one another, yet all of you study the dharma. So, what do you take from the dharma you are studying? That is the view you should be putting into action at this moment." Whereupon, both arguing factions jointly looked at the older nun and said sharply, "Don't remind us about the view of dharma. We know what that is. You shouldn't be telling us what to do and not do."

I found that really very funny. I laughed out loud and have been teasing them about it since. Because—why not? As dharma practitioners, we don't have the luxury of saying "I don't want to remember the dharma right now. This moment is different from the view of the dharma."

The view of the dharma has to be relevant at all times: in situations that are to our liking, and even more so in those we don't like or expect. As we enter into a new year,

it is very important to remember to keep the view of dharma in mind and, as much as possible, try to integrate it into our lives.

In that way, the whole spectrum of dharma teachings you have heard so far—whether refuge and the generation of bodhichitta, the four immeasurables, the four reminders, the six or ten paramitas, the truth of impermanence and interdependence, the nature of emptiness, the creation and completion stages, or shamatha and vipashyana—can be taken seamlessly into each moment. Then the view of the dharma will permeate whatever you encounter in life, in a way that is flowing and continuous.

It isn't necessary to say anything more specific than that. But it has always been a tradition to give out a few instructions for the year. In lieu of that, perhaps it would be good to look at eight things that we could all work on this year. You should try them and I will do so myself, and let's see how far we get with this in 2017.

Eight Steps to Take into the New Year

The eight practices I would like all of us to keep in mind this year have to do with freeing oneself from the tendency to control. Here are eight things we can really try to free from the domain of the self and the self's habit of control.

First: Freeing Sound

First, work with sound. Allow sound to be free from the domain and control of the self. You may be trying to sit, for example, in a situation where you can hear many sounds, pleasant or unpleasant. It could be a lot of chitchat, or loud music, or neighbors, or traffic sounds. It could be a whole campus filled with tourists, as we had here today. The stupa grounds were filled with thousands of tourists trying to celebrate the New Year, somewhat imprisoning all of us. A lot of chatter could be heard all around, which is not necessarily what you want to hear if you are in a monastery trying to be in retreat.

The moment you hear these sounds, the self's tendency is to want to control them. You want to raise or lower the volume; you want sound to become silence or silence to become sound, because you like or don't like these sounds.

This year it would be good for all of us to practice simply letting sound be free. The moment you free sound from the domain of self's control, you will find that every sound has the capacity to become sweet music. You have to develop a friendship with sound. This is something I was trying to practice and work with in my recent retreat. When you really relax with the sounds or silence around you, there is a melody in the

momentum of sounds. When you let yourself be at peace with them, even the worst of sounds will transform into melodious music.

Second: Freeing Movement

The second step is to work in the same way with movement. Train in letting the movement of your physical body be free from the domain of the self and the self's attempts to control it. Especially as practitioners, this year I would like all of us to try and commit as much as possible to being more flexible with our bodies. This could include going for walks, gardening, doing yoga or any other kinds of exercise.

Whatever you choose to do, allow the physical movement of the body to be especially at the service of others. Physically do something that lets others enjoy the space, whether by creating a beautiful garden, or cooking, or cleaning and sweeping. This is why the old sages and great teachers of the Zen traditions and the mahayana and vajrayana traditions put so much emphasis on physical service. I'm beginning to understand the value of it more and more.

In service, the physical movement of the body is free of the self's control, free of "I only sit like this, it's my preferred posture," or "I am not going to move." When the self controls the physical body, self-cherishing and self-attachment are made stronger and more impactful. In order to defeat that, I would encourage you to allow the physical movement of your body to be as free as possible from the self and the self's control.

Then you will understand the concept of what is called in Tibetan *gar*, or dance. Simple physical movement, itself, becomes *gar*. The movement of the body becomes a beautiful mudra, or physical expression, of sustaining more awareness of the environment and the needs of others, and the ability to go beyond self-attachment and self-importance.

Third: Freeing Your Smile

The third thing I would like you to keep in mind is to let your smile be free from the self and self's control. In my school days I had a teacher who used to tell us, "Don't be stingy with your smile." As I was going through some of my old notebooks recently, I read that line written by my class teacher: Don't be stingy with your smile. And I think that is so true.

Let your smile be free of the self and the self's control, and you will find it becomes laughter. As simple as this is, sadly enough, I find that we don't laugh as much these days. We are stingy with our laughter. Everything is so very serious, especially for practitioners. We are serious about our practice; we're serious about what we do and where we sit; we're serious about walking up and down the hill. We are serious about

everything. Sometimes being serious is good—but one would enjoy so much more a nice laugh, simple laughter and joy.

The new thing we see now when we travel, especially in India—I don't know if you have these in the West—is a lot of “laughter clubs.” In the early mornings, especially the senior citizens meet in the parks and they laugh. For no reason, somebody will start to laugh and then they all fling their arms up and laugh loudly. It is said to be very therapeutic. I've been looking into this and thinking how very nice it is—but also how very sad that we have to have clubs and someone actually leading us in laughter. And how sad that we always have to look for causes of laughter; if I were to tell you all to laugh, you would ask, “why?”

Why should we laugh? Life is very short. How serious do you want it to be, and for what? It would be so much better to laugh, especially when we have so much chaos and confusion everywhere. A good laugh might be just the right medicine for all of us.

A good laugh starts when you free your smile a bit free from the domain of self's control, the domain of those “intelligent smiles,” where even in conversation your smile is very measured. The self's control makes you very uncomfortable to be the only one who is really laughing or smiling. You feel sort of foolish, because you really ought to be serious to be wise or profound. But when you ask how to handle all of the challenges facing the world today, this might be a very good year to give yourself some moments of laughter. Watch a funny movie, laugh with your friends, join a laughter club.

Whether you laugh on your own or with others, laughter always begins by freeing your smile a bit from the control of the self.

Fourth: Freeing Life

In the same way, you could work with freeing life, itself, from the domain of your control. If you are not able to think about this in terms of long periods of time, try it from moment to moment. Whenever you can, let a moment of your life be a little freer from the domain of the self's control.

If you can encourage yourself from time to time to let this moment, here and now, be free from the control of the self, you will immediately find this moment to be a celebration.

Not that you have to celebrate in all the usual ways; you don't need to go anywhere in particular, or spend a lot of money, or do anything extraordinary. In this moment here and now, you could simply enjoy and be genuinely open to whatever arises. And in

the spontaneity of this moment, you could always find celebration. So, free your life up a bit from the domain of the self and self's control.

Fifth: Freeing Plans and Agendas

To take the fifth step, from time to time—if possible beginning today—surrender all kinds of plans and agendas. Free yourself from the domain of the self's control over everything you do in life. You *can't* really plan everything; but today, sadly, planning is so common, there is no spontaneity at any given moment.

Instead of plans and schedules, surrender yourself to the moment. And in that moment fill your mind with gratitude: gratitude to your parents; gratitude to your family, friends, spouses, brothers and sisters, children, uncles and aunts, neighbors—and especially gratitude to your teacher, the lineage masters, and all those great, enlightened beings who have directly and indirectly allowed each of us to recognize and develop our human potential. In that one single moment of surrendering to gratitude, you will find that devotion arises.

Many people ask about devotion and what devotion actually means. It is a very big topic. But a simple and poignant way to capture it would be this:

*Devotion is a moment of true humility and gratitude
for all the goodness that arises from a source.
Being grateful to that source is devotion.*

Therefore, work with this as your fifth step.

Sixth: Freeing the Mind

The sixth step is to free your *mind* from the domain of the self. Just allow your mind to be completely vast, without trying to control or convince it to be a particular way. When you allow your mind to be free of the domain of the self, what you will always find is meditation.

A few days ago, I was speaking with some of the young people and the topic turned to meditation. In that small group there was a sort of group leader, to whom everybody had turned to ask, “Do *you* meditate?” But before even suggesting any interest in meditation, he looked at me and said, “No, no. I don't meditate. I'm too restless to sit quietly.” Noting his habit of shaking his legs while sitting and talking to others, he said, “Look, I can't even keep my legs still just sitting here. I'm so restless I have to be moving all the time. How could I meditate, when I can't even sit still?”

For the moment, we just left it at that. But it got me to thinking about what goes on in people's minds when they think about meditation. Now, some people have had

wonderful teachers and teachings, and having practiced, they may know what meditation really means. But generally speaking, people seem to think that meditation is just about sitting in silence, being without thoughts, and sitting very still—which many of them find tremendously difficult. People who are curious about meditation often ask, “How can you sit so quietly and so still for so many long hours?” Many people who pass by the shrine room and see the monks and nuns meditating have been heard to say to one another, “This is how they sit—for hours and hours!”

That is one aspect of meditation. But is that all that meditation is about? What does meditation really mean? We have to keep in mind that all the different forms and techniques of meditation that allow us to develop insight are all *aspects* of meditation.

The key to cultivating the meditation that works directly with the nature of mind is to free the mind from the control of the self.

The real characteristic of meditation is the mind meeting its own nature and being able to remain within that. This meditation isn't restricted to a still body. Your body could be moving; your body could be anywhere, engaging in any kind of activity—and yet, you could be meditating.

The key to cultivating the meditation that works directly with the nature of mind is to free the mind from the control of the self. So as you go through your day, moment to moment, while you are going for that walk or engaging in some activity, give yourself many small opportunities to free your mind from your habit of trying to control it: move like this, think like this, talk like this, work like this, question in this way, sit this way or that, be satisfied or not. Instead of trying to control the mind, simply let it be free. Give it a respite from the enormously habitual ways we try to shape and control it.

In those moments when you free the mind from the control of the self, you will find the genuine the face of your own nature. That would be truly engaging in meditation.

Seventh: Freeing Feelings

I would say that the seventh step for practitioners is to free feelings from the domain of the self and self's control. Just as you would allow a cool breeze to touch your skin and pass on, train in allowing feelings to touch you like a breeze that passes on into the next moment.

When you don't give the breeze of feelings the freedom to flow on, that's when feelings becomes more solid and impactful. So even if you can't do it all the time, from time to time keep in mind the example of a breeze. Especially when a strong feeling arises, let it touch you and pass on. Free the feeling from the self's tendency to

control how it should act or react, what it should or should not become, whether it should come closer or not, or relate to something or not. When you free feelings from the habitual tendency to control them, you will immediately find you have come much closer to the basic nature.

The nature of mind is found when you allow all that covers it up to be free, without trying to control or transform it into something else.

What is the nature of mind? This is a question we all work with. The nature of mind is found when you allow all that covers it up to be free, without trying to control or transform it into something else. So, as much as possible, remind yourself to free feelings from the domain of the self and self's control—and in that moment you will find you are resting in the nature itself.

Eighth: Freeing the Nature of Emptiness

The eighth step, especially for those of you who have been studying dharma for many years, is try to free the nature of emptiness from the domain of the self and self's control. Emptiness is this or that; or, yes, everything is emptiness; or, no, *that* isn't emptiness—when you try to structure emptiness, you get so stuck in the moment that you don't see emptiness at all.

So free the emptiness nature, the reality of all phenomena, from the domain of self and self's control. And in that moment you will find natural bliss: bliss and emptiness. Bliss being the spontaneous, pervasive nature that arises when the emptiness is freed from the control of the self.

So, if you need numbers or something to start off your new year, these are eight things you could work with. As much as possible, work with letting sound be free of the domain of self, so that all sounds could arise as music. Let movement be free, so that every movement can arise as dance. Let your smile be free from the domain of the self so that your smile can become laughter. Let life be free of the self and its control, and you will always find celebration. Let plans and agendas be free from the domain of self and its control, and surrender yourself to a moment of gratitude; and in that moment you will find devotion. Free mind from the domain of self and its control, and you will find meditation. Free feelings from the domain of self and its control, and you will immediately find the nature. Free emptiness from the domain of self and its control, and there is bliss.

So work with these eight steps. Of course, we could go on adding on in many different ways. But eight is always an auspicious number, so we could start with these eight.

A Beautiful Moon in the Sky

I would also like to share with you a little anecdote I read this morning—given my own habit of liking to read some small passage, or quote, or inspiring verse in the morning, to set off the day. This New Year’s morning, I opened one of the books on my table to find this anecdote.

One day, a thief decided he was going to go into the nearby hut of a Zen master and steal whatever the master had. So he waited for the Zen teacher to go away and then went into his hut—where unfortunately there was nothing to steal. Not finding anything, he left. Walking down the hill, he chanced upon the Zen teacher walking back up with a pile of wood.

The Zen master stopped the thief and said, “Oh, you must have gone to rob my hut. Poor you, I don’t have anything to steal. It’s so sad you are leaving with nothing. Let me take off my clothes and give them to you, then at least you’ll have something.” So he took off his clothes and gave them to the thief, who didn’t know what to make of this. The very bewildered thief walked off with the teacher’s robes, and the teacher climbed on. But a little way up the hill, the teacher looked back and said, “Oh, that poor man. Right now, he’ll have to make do with my old robes—but how I wish I could have given him the beautiful moon in the sky.”

This wonderful anecdote best captures everything I would like to convey to you on this New Year’s Day.

There are still so many wonderful, beautiful things in the world—at no cost, requiring no effort, and no great agendas or planning. The beautiful sun is shining right now in some countries; and in other countries, a beautiful moon is up in the sky. Here in Mindrolling in India, a wonderful thunderstorm is happening outside. And everywhere, there are beautiful flowers and wonderful children. Most of you listening to me are not yet dying or dead. We can still hear, some of us less well than others but we can hear. We can see; we may need glasses but we can see. We can still walk, and we can still eat and taste food. And the many people around us are still alive. Seeing all these wonderful things, we can still be inspired to continue with greater courage and hope.

We sometimes disregard the beautiful moon, thinking that everything requires a lot of effort. We become very linear in our assumption that enjoying ourselves, being happy, or getting something or somewhere requires a lot of planning and control. But sometimes, just relax a bit and appreciate the wisdom of the Zen teacher. For him, the greatest happiness was enjoying the moon—with or without his clothes.

The thief's approach is to think that happiness comes from obtaining things, having something tangible in our hands, even if it's just a piece of paper. If it is tangible, if it's concrete, if it's in our hands—this, we think, is the source of our happiness. And in that moment, we forget to appreciate the blue sky: simple and ever-present. We forget to stand up and feel the ground under our feet, and in that find happiness and peace. We forget all the tremendous reasons we have to be happy, hopeful, and to look forward with courage.

As you continue into 2017, join me and us all in really celebrating and enjoying the simple things that are everywhere around us. They are reason enough and powerful enough for us to celebrate life with hope and inspiration. Look at the things that are closest to you, the things immediately surrounding you, and you will find many, many reasons to go on with life with great courage, great hope, and great happiness.

Today all of us at Mindrolling—Jetsunla, the rinpoches, monks, nuns, and sangha friends—gather to wish all of you, wherever you are around the world, good health, good happiness, and a very, very happy new year. We hope that each of you will spend this day enjoying the many blessings and good things within and around us all—and that you will work with these eight little steps in the new year.

With all my love from Mindrolling, I send you my prayers and very best wishes.

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