

## Guidelines for Vajrayana Group Practice Intensives

When the Sakyong introduced the Primordial Rigden ngöndro in 2004, he began to emphasize the importance and power of group vajrayana practice. With all of our practices, the point is not only how we do our individual practice, but how we connect to each other and live our lives altogether. Particularly with our aspiration to create enlightened society, it is important for us to gather, practice, study, work, and celebrate as a community. In addition, practicing under the guidance of senior teachers in a group setting helps us to deepen our practice and understanding of the vajrayana, and feel more connected to what we are doing.

The practice guidelines that follow describe how the Sakyong would like students to proceed if possible. Students or groups who are unable to practice in the manner described are encouraged to discuss an alternative plan with their meditation instructor and/or the Shambhala Office of Practice and Education. The main point is to continue with one's practice- not to get held up because one cannot attend a group retreat, for example.

Please note: Students practicing by time or by number are now asked to do one month of group practice as part of their practice requirements. This is the case whether practicing the Primordial Rigden ngöndro, Werma Sadhana, Kagyü ngöndro, or Vajrayogini Sadhana.

### Group Practice

The group practice may be completed as follows:

1. Residential group practice:  
The guidance and study opportunity provided by the senior teacher at the residential retreat is an important element of these retreats.
  - Two weeks (or more) of group practice at a vajrayana retreat with the Sakyong, such as the Shambhala Dzogchen retreat (now called Vajra Garchen, or Great Vajra camp)
  - or
  - A group retreat at a residential practice centre with an acharya or senior teacher. Participants can do two one-week retreats if necessary.
2. Local or regional group practice
  - For the remaining two weeks, one can do group intensives at local or regional centres for time periods of one weekend up to two weeks. Senior ngöndro instructors and teachers may lead these local group intensives and provide guided study. If a teacher is not available, and/or there's a mixed practice group, participants can, for example, choose a vajra assembly or talk to study together.
  - Weekly ngöndro and Werma sadhana study groups, each with three modules that altogether comprise a week of the group practice requirement for ngöndro and Werma Sadhana respectively.

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Go to: <http://www.shambhala.org/members/ps/teacher.php> and look under Vajrayana Practice and Study for ngöndro and werma study group syllabi. [Contact this office](#) for the password.

Although it is difficult to establish a strong container when participants are practicing locally and sleeping at home, it may under some circumstances, (where there are language translation issues or geographic isolation, for example), make sense to invite an acharya or senior teacher to lead a local non-residential one or two-week intensive that would qualify for the residential portion of the group practice. Please contact the Shambhala Office of Practice and Education if you have a local need of this nature..

### **How to practice together**

The following are guidelines to help center administrators and teachers coordinate and lead weekend or one-week intensives at their local centres.

#### **Establishing the container**

Establishing a strong container for the intensive is an important aspect of the practice environment, and is particularly important for weekend retreats where practitioners may be commuting to and from home. Encouraging attendance for the whole retreat and having lunch and dinner together (if you are including an evening event) will all help to create a cohesive and supportive retreat environment. Some recent intensives included oryoki meals.

In addition to two 3-hour practice sessions daily, the intensive could include evening talks and discussion if there are experienced ngöndro instructors or senior teachers available. If not, the group could study and discuss selected readings (including the text itself) or listen to audio tapes. (At practice centres, acharyas or authorized senior seminary faculty will lead the intensives.)

As a celebratory conclusion to the intensive, the group could do a feast. Please note that, as a rule, the Sadhana of Mahamudra feast is restricted to Shambhala vajrayana students who have received pointing out instruction. The only exception to this is during the observance of Parinirvana Day for the Vidyadhara, where the feast is open to the public.

#### **Single practice or mixed practice groups**

In centres with large numbers of Werma or Rigden ngöndro practitioners, for instance, it makes sense to hold group practice events specifically and exclusively for a particular practice. It is powerful to practice out loud as a group, and to study material that is focused on your particular practice.

If there are a number of practitioners beginning a particular practice, the umdze could read the visualization section aloud once in the middle of the practice session—this was helpful to prostrators at one recent intensive. At seminary, the umdze read the refuge formula aloud for part of the practice session, helping students new to prostrations coordinate body, speech and visualization. This could also be done with the mantras for the other three practices. This approach wouldn't necessarily be helpful if the group is mixed and practicing in the same room.

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Centres with small numbers of practitioners doing a variety of practices, may need or want to hold mixed-practice group retreats. In this case, everybody would practice together. The group study could be based on more generally applicable vajrayana materials such as the Vajra Assemblies. Alternatively, the group may divide up during the study period for more focused study using readings and recordings.

Some centres, during recent week-long holiday intensives, extended an invitation to sadhakas and shamatha students to participate. All practices were done simultaneously in the same room. In these cases, shamatha students practiced in the front of the room with prostrators behind them and sadhakas near the back. For the benefit of the shamatha students, a senior teacher gave a brief and general explanation about ngöndro and sadhana practice.

Centres will have to assess their local situations and determine whether single-practice or mixed practice group retreats (or a combination) best meet the needs of their practice population.

### **Ngöndro practice guidelines**

People practicing the Primordial Rigden ngöndro should engage in one ngöndro at a time – ie., prostrations for one week, mantra for one week, etc. The Sakyong has been clear that he would like new ngöndro students to spend some time with one practice before beginning the next one. Please see the Shambhala Vajrayana Path document for more details about how to do this practice.

- If all practitioners in the group are practicing the Rigden ngöndro, the group can begin with opening chants and continue together out loud through the Outer Preliminaries. Then individuals would continue with their own practice until the end of the session.
- If the group includes tantrikas doing the Karma Kagyü ngöndro, then the group can begin together with opening chants, and continue quietly with whichever practice they are doing until the end of the session.
- Ngöndro practitioners from other sanghas – even those using other texts – are welcome to practice with Shambhala ngöndro students. Differing texts should not be shared as they require different lungs. Vajrayana students of other teachers should not be given commentary or oral instructions (*Vajradhatu Ngöndro Manual*, *Vajra Assemblies*, *Early Tantra Groups*, etc.) from our lineage relating to these practices unless they have requested and received permission from the Sakyong to study these materials. These students should practice and study following the instructions they have received from their own teacher.

If there are ngondro instructors available who are doing this practice, include opportunities for interviews with an instructor. Group interviews with an instructor might be helpful at centres where there is limited MI support.

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**Suggested Study Materials:**

Please see the Shambhala Vajrayana Path document for suggested study materials corresponding to each practice.

**General vajrayana resources**

- The oral instructions contained in the *Vajradhatu Ngöndro Manual*\*
- *The Chariot of Liberation* (book or audio tapes) These are four talks on each of the ngöndro practices by The Vajra Regent and the Dorje Loppön\*
- *Torch of Certainty* by Jamgön Kongtrül
- *Words of my Perfect Teacher* by Patrül Rinpoche
- *Collected Vajra Assemblies, Vol.I, Vol. II*

**Primordial Rigden ngöndro**

- 2004 Vajrayana Seminary video tapes\* (These are the first talks that were given by the Sakya on the Primordial Rigden ngöndro)
  - Talk 7 (commentary on the Royal Invocation, Outer Preliminaries),
  - Talk 9 (commentary on the bodhichitta practice, prostrations, mantra, mandala)
  - Talk 9 also contains the transmission for lungta practice. This section of Talk 9 should only be shown if all the participants have had this transmission; if not, fast forward through this section.
  - Talk 10 (commentary on guru yoga),
  - Talk 11 (questions & answers)
- Shambhala root texts and sourcebooks

**Werma Sadhana**

- *Werma Sadhana Manual* (available to Kalapa Assembly graduates)\*\*
- *1978 Kalapa Assembly Transcripts*, by the Dorje Dradül (available to Kalapa Assembly graduates \*)

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**IV. Suggested daily schedule**

Please note: the times below are approximate.

**I. For groups consisting of prostrators only and no evening event:**

9:00 am – 12 noon	
9-10 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Opening chants: Shambhala Lineage Supplication, Seven-Line Supplication, Kagyü Lineage Supplication, Homage</li><li>• Shamatha, Royal Invocation and Outer Preliminaries (contemplate 4-5 minutes each)</li></ul>
10-11:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prostrations</li></ul>
11:15 -11:45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bodhichitta contemplation</li></ul>
11:45-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conclusion and dedication of merit</li></ul>
12 – 1:30	Lunch
1:30 – 6pm	
1:30 - 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sitting, talk, discussion, or group study</li></ul>
3 - 3:45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shamatha, Royal Invocation and Outer Preliminaries (contemplate 4-5 minutes each)</li></ul>
3:45 - 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prostrations</li></ul>
5 – 5:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bodhichitta contemplation</li></ul>
5:30 - 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conclusion and closing chants</li></ul>

**II. For groups consisting of prostrators only and an evening talk or tape:**

9:00 am – 12 noon	
9-10 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Opening chants: Shambhala Lineage Supplication, Seven-Line Supplication, Kagyü Lineage Supplication, Homage</li><li>• Shamatha, Royal Invocation and Outer Preliminaries (contemplate 4-5 minutes each)</li></ul>
10-11:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prostrations</li></ul>
11:15-11:45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bodhichitta contemplation</li></ul>
11:45-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conclusion and dedication of merit</li></ul>
12 – 1:30	Lunch
1:30 – 5 pm	
1:30-2:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shamatha, Royal Invocation and Outer Preliminaries (contemplate 4-5 minutes each)</li></ul>
2:15-3:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prostrations</li></ul>
3:30-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bodhichitta contemplation</li></ul>
4-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conclusion and closing chants</li></ul>
5– 6:30 pm	Dinner (if there is an evening session)
6:30 – 9 pm	Talk and discussion or group study

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**For groups with people doing different Rigden ngöndro practices:**

Do opening chants, shamatha, expel stale air, the Royal Invocation and Outer Preliminaries together as a group, then continue with individual practices until 12 noon and after lunch until it is time for closing chants.

**For groups with people doing different ngöndros (ie., Rigden and Kagyü ngöndro) and/or other practices:**

Do opening and closing chants together.

\* These materials are available from Vajradhatu Publications & Kalapa Recordings – [shop@shambhala.org](mailto:shop@shambhala.org)

\*\* The Werma Sadhana Manual is available from the Nalanda Translation Group

Note: Detailed practice instructions accompany the published text of the Primordial Rigden. Please refer to these. They are available from Vajradhatu Publications– [shop@shambhala.org](mailto:shop@shambhala.org)