

INTRODUCTION TO THE DRALA PRINCIPLE

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We may have been interested in our world when we were little children, but then we were taught how to handle it by our parents who had already developed a system to deal with the world and to shield themselves from it at the same time. As we accepted that system, we lost contact with the freshness and curiosity of experience. - *Chögyam Trungpa*

The “drala principle” refers to a body of teachings the Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa presented in the last decade of his life, from 1978 to 1986. The roots of the drala principle precede the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet and are found in the indigenous traditions of that country - as they are in all countries. The drala principle is applicable, not to Buddhist practitioners alone, but to anyone. These teachings speak to the heart, whether one is, so to speak, religiously, artistically or politically motivated.

Drala is the *elemental presence* of the world that is available to us through sense perceptions. When we open to trees, flowers, a creek or clouds we encounter an actual wisdom, though one that is not separate from our own. Beholding a river is much more than merely looking at a river; potentially, we are meeting the dralas. A friend of mine was once with her family in upstate New York. It was winter and they had hiked into a forest. The landscape was one of cold and snow, whiteness and silence, birch trees. Astonished by the pristine beauty, my friend realized it was her *duty* - not just to notice this beauty - but to stop and linger with it. To let it penetrate her. To listen. We have failed to see our first responsibility to the world is an aesthetic one.

In the drala teachings, each of the senses is considered an “unlimited field of perception” in which there are sights, sounds and feelings “we have never experienced before” - no one has ever experienced! Each sense moment, if we are present for it, is a gate into the elemental wisdom of the world, even a cold sip of coffee could ignite the experience of Yeats: “While on the shop and street I gazed / My body of a sudden blazed.” Every perception is a *pure perception*; from the feel of a meager pebble stuck in our shoe to the meow of a house cat. Through this kind of perception we discover that we live in a vast, singular and unexplored world.

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To make a stone stonier, that is the purpose of art. Viktor Slovski

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Sometimes a stone, a tree, a teacup or a violin processes an intangible presence, a numinosity, that cannot be explained. The presence might not always be there, or only be there for a short period of time, but that presence may refer to another dimension of the drala principle. Just as our tangible world is populated - and sometimes densely populated - with people and other sentient creatures, the intangible or "invisible world" (invisible to most of us) is densely populated as well, and among these beings, entities, or spirits are *classes* of beings, or *qualities* of being, called dralas. Katumbries, kachinas, kami, gnomes, elves, angels, gods. Any being who acts on behalf of the non-dualistic and compassionate nature of existence could be considered a drala. The dralas are not really part of some other world, but latent everywhere. The dralas, as Chögyam Trungpa so often said, want very much to meet us.

Using metaphors in the form of words, names and especially mantras or seed-syllables traditionally plays a central part in calling to the dralas, announcing our interest in meeting them, our availability. One example of the fertility of the drala principle is the Ganges River, perhaps historically home to the world's largest population of dralas! Itself a drala. This river, so long adored (and now like most rivers, so under siege by pollution and human disregard of its essential sacredness) traditionally has one-hundred and eight names, each of them a form of praise and, in that it speaks of a specific quality, the name of a drala(s) as well:

Visnu-padabja-sambhuta : *Born from the lotus like foot of Visnu*

Himancalendra-tanaya : *Daughter of the Lord of Himalaya*

Ksira-subhra : *White as milk*

Nataibhiti-hrt : *Carrying away fear*

Ramya : *Delightful*

Atula : *Peerless*

Japa Muttering : *Whispering*

Jagan-matr : *Mother of what lives or moves*

discovering the dralas

On the most simple and immediate level, the moment-to-moment path of discovering the drala principle might follow these steps, which will be elaborated on in subsequent text.

Each moment of perception can potentially be experienced as a moment of *pure perception* - experience not yet mediated through discursive thought and conceptual process. These moments are not yet conditioned by hope and fear, by our opinions, desires and beliefs. This immediate awareness of pure perception is “without choice, without demand, without anxiety”.

Moments of pure perception are *experiences of beauty expressed though specific details*. It is our duty to notice the details that call to us - any taste, any sight, any sound. This is the call of the dralas.

If we quiet our mind by opening to these details, and if we listen to the response of our heart, we may discover our moment-to-moment, day-to-day direction. Thus we begin to *follow* our heart, to live beyond conditioning - and to be led by the dralas. Not only is our heart the source of our direction in life, it is the source of our confidence.

a course of study

Below is a partial outline of some of the topics of study of the drala principle. Each topic is introduced and briefly described, often simply with a quote. (In teaching, I've shared these themes - and quotes - with hundreds of people. These words are old friends who I have shared with people who have become friends and who I am now sharing with new friends...)

simply relax

The experience of drala is as close as our own eyes, ears and tongue. We don't have to *try* to taste, say, an orange, we simply need to relax into the presence of the flavor on our tongue and the orange naturally begins to communicate with us. We are generally too active and our own business drowns out the messages of the world around us. To access the dralas we must *do* less and *be* more.

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Give yourself a break. That doesn't mean to say that you should drive to the closest bar and have lots to drink or go to a movie. Just enjoy the day, your normal existence. Allow yourself to sit in your home or take a drive into the mountains. Park your car somewhere;

just sit; just be. It sounds very simplistic, but it has a lot of magic. You begin to pick up on clouds, sunshine and weather, the mountains, your past, your chatter with your grand-mother and your grandfather, your own mother, your own father. You begin to pick up on a lot of things. Just let them pass like the chatter of a brook as it hits the rocks. We have to give ourselves some time to be.

We've been clouded by going to school, looking for a job—our lives are cluttered by all sorts of things. Your friends want you to come have a drink with them, which you don't want to do. Life is crowded with all sorts of garbage. In themselves, those things aren't garbage, but they're cumbersome when they get in the way of how to relax, how to be, how to trust, how to be a warrior. We've missed so many possibilities for that, but there are so many more possibilities that we can catch. We have to learn to be kinder to ourselves, much more kind. Smile a lot, although nobody is watching you smile. Listen to your own brook, echoing yourself. You can do a good job.

In the sitting practice of meditation, when you begin to be still, hundreds of thousands, millions, and billions of thoughts will go through your mind. But they just pass through, and only the worthy ones leave their fish eggs behind. We have to leave our-selves some time to be. You're not going to see the Shambhala vision, you're not even going to survive, by not leaving yourself a minute to be, a minute to smile. If you don't grant yourself a good time, you're not going to get any Shambhala wisdom, even if you're at the top of your class technically speaking. Please, I beg you, please, give yourself a good time.

Chögyam Trungpa, from *The Great Eastern Sun*.

allow limitation

Limitation is the practice or discipline that supports *being*. Becoming receptive or open is a natural byproduct of limitation. Meditation is a quintessential act of limitation (though one shouldn't be hemmed in by preconceived ideas of what meditation is, or where or how it can occur!). Even watching a movie requires the limitation of remaining quiet and sitting still. There is, obviously, no better way possible to receive the experience of a movie... [though the drala principle is a more interesting movie that costs nothing to see]. Accepting limitation is a conscious choice in which we have begun to realize the world becomes a far more interesting and abundant place *if* we limit ourselves.

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One tires of living in the country, and moves to the city; one tires of one's native land, and travels abroad; one tires of Europe and goes to America, and so on; finally one indulges in the sentimental hope

of endless journeyings from star to star. Or the movement is different but still extensive. One tires of porcelain dishes and eats on silver; one tires of silver and turns to gold; one burns half of Rome to get an idea of the burning of Troy. But this method defeats itself, it is plain endlessness.

My own method does not consist in such a change of field, but rather resembles the true rotation method in changing the crop and the mode of cultivation, rather than the field. Here we have the principle of limitation, the only saving principle in the world. The more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become in imagination. - *Soren Kiekegard*

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I embarked on two years of painting those paintings, two lines on each canvas, and at the end of two years there were ten of them. So I painted a total of twenty lines over a period of two years of very, very intense activity. I mean, I essentially spent twelve and fifteen hours a day in the studio, seven days a week. In fact I had no separation between by studio life and my outside life. There was no separation between me and those paintings...

I put myself in that disciplined position, and one of the tools I used was boredom. Boredom is a very good tool. Because whenever you play creative games, what you normally do is you bring to the situation all your aspirations, all your assumptions, all your ambitions - all your stuff. And then you pile it up on your painting, reading into the painting all the things you want it to be. I'm sure it's the same with writing; you load it up with all your illusions about what it is. Boredom's a great way to break that. You do the same thing over and over again until you're bored stiff with it. Then all your illusions, aspirations, everything just drains off. And now what you see is what you get. - Robert Irwin, from *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*.

become part of a lineage

A lineage, as the word is used here, means any tradition that evokes and propagates drala. A painting, say, of Cezanne is loaded with drala. A man like Cezanne does not simply happen, but is someone who received the training and inspiration of countless ancestors before him and then put what he received into practice. That Cezanne apocryphally painted until

his eyes bled is a measure of the work and sacrifice required to become a great lineage holder. Spiritual or religious lineages have no doubt produced our greatest lineage figures, but the path of drala cannot be defined as strictly sacred or secular. It could occur wherever genuine goodness and devotion are manifested. We might not even realize the lineages we are already part of; anyone who has ever read a poem has made contact with one of humanity's most universal, primordial and wonderful lineages.

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I found no grail. But I did discover the modern tradition. Because modernity is not a poetic school but a lineage, a family dispersed over several continents and which for two centuries has survived many sudden changes and misfortunes: public indifference, isolation, and tribunals in the name of religious, political, academic and sexual orthodoxy. Being a tradition and not a doctrine, it has been able to persist and to change at the same time. This is also why it is so diverse. Each poetic adventure is distinct, and each poet has sown a different plant in the miraculous forest of speaking trees. Yet if the poems are different and each path distinct, what is it that unites these poets? Not an aesthetic but a search. - Octavio Paz, 20th Century Mexican poet and Nobel Laureate.

seek victory over war

Chögyam Trungpa initially translated Tibetan drala into an English compound word, wargod. He termed this "not the best translation," but its provisional use was to establish dralas as "gods who conquer war rather than propagate it." We can think of dralas as expressions of the fundamental, non-dualistic nature of the world; they potentially come to our support when we express the courage to be non-aggressive. Chögyam Trungpa coined the term, "victory over war" to express a goal of the drala principle.

Just as murder is an extreme expression of aggression, war is collective aggression at its utmost, but the seeds of war are in each of us. Aggression alienates us from the drala principle. Aggression divides people from one another, but it also divides us from the world we are in. War is no longer simply a military exercise; we are so at war with our environment that our very survival is imperiled. So great is this treat that our various regional wars - or even nuclear war - are overshadowed by our environmental crisis. The drala principle requires an honest study and constant unmasking of our own aggression and an allegiance to non-aggression. Non-aggression is not necessarily pacifism, but is an intelligent, firm and awake state of being.

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War has an alluring simplicity. It reduces the ambiguities of life to blacks and whites. It fills our mundane days with passion. It promises to rid us of our problems. When it is over many miss it. I have sat in Sarajevo cafés and heard that although no one wished back the suffering, they all yearned for the lost spirit of self-sacrifice and collective struggle.

War's cost is exacting. It destroys families. It leaves behind a wasteland, irreconcilable grief. It is a disease, and in the night air I smell its contagion.. Justice is not at issue here: war consumes the good along with the wicked. There will be no stopping it. Pity will be banished. Fear will rule. It is the old lie again, told to children desperate for glory: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.* - Chris Hedges, author, former New York Times war correspondent.

discover that *luxury is experiencing reality*

The intriguing quote, "Luxury is experiencing reality" is another phrase Chögyam Trungpa used which goes to the heart of the drala principle. In our modern world of technology and consumerism we live tremendously and unnecessarily shielded from the elements; as Trungpa taught, "so many devices are presented to us...

ten thousand types of gloves and a hundred thousand types of shoes and millions of masks to ward off animals in the real world... Just in case you smell a cow, you have an aerosol.

Chögyam Trungpa counseled his students that the life envisioned in Nova Scotia must be highly connected to the earth.

We are talking about a farming situation in some sense: how we are going to experience the land properly, the real land, the land that grows crops and the land on which animals are raised. It is very, very important for us as students of Shambhala that when we first wake up in our bedrooms, the first incense we smell is either cow manure or horse manure or the smell of plants.... We have to back and experience how the earth words rather than purely smelling our neighbor's bacon cooking as soon as we wake up... We all have to work on the earth, literally and properly.

Chögyam Trungpa's vision was of course not the forced "reeducation" of Mao's Cultural Revolution, but a call for devotion and sacrifice in the spirit of sanity and as an alternative to the dark future facing humanity if the excesses of our age continue unchecked. Quite simply, when we live with awareness of the elements, we live in luxury. Conversely, nearly everything we have come to call luxury is an excess, a distraction, a prison. The

experience of rain is one of life's great luxuries, the source of life falling from the sky! To experience the reality of rain does not mean to go out without an umbrella or a jacket if it is cold, to give up common sense comforts. But the luxuries of the "setting sun" world of modern mass culture is mere endless consumerism based on hungering for ever greater and mindless comforts and entertainments.



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In the following Taoist passage, one doesn't need to understand its esoteric implications to be moved by its dramatically devastating conclusion:

The fading away of the Tao is when openness turns into spirit, spirit turns into energy, and energy turns into form. When form is born, everything is thereby stultified. The functioning of the Tao is when form turns into energy, energy turns into spirit, and spirit turns into openness. When openness is clear, everything thereby flows freely.

Therefore ancient sages investigated the beginnings of free flow and stultification, found the source of evolution, forgot form to cultivate energy, forgot energy to cultivate spirit, and forgot spirit to cultivate openness.

When openness turns into spirit, spirit turns into energy, energy turns into form, and form turns into vitality, then vitality turns into attention. Attention turns into social gesturing, social gesturing turns into elevation and humbling. Elevation and humbling turn into high and low positioning, high and low positioning turns into discrimination.

Discrimination turns into official status, status turns into cars. Cars turn into mansions, mansions turn into palaces. Palaces turn into banquet halls, banquet halls turn into extravagance. Extravagance turns into acquisitiveness, acquisitiveness turns into fraud. Fraud turns into punishment, punishment turns into rebellion. Rebellion turns into armament, armament turns into strife and plunder, strife and plunder turn into defeat and destruction.

From *The Immortal Sisters: Secret Teachings of Taoist Women*, translated and edited by Thomas Cleary. This section was written in the 10th century by Tan Jingsheng. It's called Transformational Writings, and it sums up the Taoist view of the evolution and involution of both individuals and collective processes:

invoke astonishment

[The following is from the text of a "Shambhala Day" (Tibetan new year) address I once gave at Naropa University.]

The word I have chosen is: ASTONISH. It is a very beautiful word. It comes from the Latin *extonare* which means "to thunder." It means to strike with sudden wonder, or even sudden fear. John Lennon said, "Because the world is round it turns me on." That's the idea. Since I thought of this word a week ago - almost immediately after I was asked to give this address - I really have been noticing how astonishing the world is. Every perception that comes to us. A person's face is astonishing. The way my dog tries to smile at me in the morning by baring his fangs is astonishing. The dentist's drill is astonishing.

A term in the Shambhala Tradition called *The Great Eastern Sun* means the world is always presenting itself to us for the first time. Chögyam Trungpa used to begin his talks by saying "Good Morning" because the sun rises in the east. The east is where things are always new. I think he saw his students this way, because when he looked at you he always seemed astonished (even appalled!). Some things are so astonishing they seem uncalled for, gratuitous or almost absurd. A flower!

Moments of perceived astonishment can transform depression and give us real vision. There is a poem by the Greek poet Odysseas Elytis in which smelling the branch of a bush transforms his mind.

One day when I was feeling abandoned by everything and a great sorrow fell slowly on my soul, walking across fields without salvation, I pulled a branch of some unknown bush. I broke it and brought it to my upper lip. I understood immediately that man is innocent. I read it in the truth-acerbic scent so vividly, I took its road with light step and a missionary heart. Until my deepest conscience was that all religions lie.

Yes, Paradise isn't nostalgia. Nor, much less, a reward. It is a right.

take one's seat

The ultimate purpose or expression of the drala principle is to take genuine responsibility for one's life. Although this requires sacrifice, it is not a burden but a joy. Becoming responsible means taking one's seat, but this seat - or throne! - is found in the chamber of one's own heart. Quite the contrary to what we're taught in school, where we are often "slowly reduced to disbelieving in ourselves," (Elytis. *Eros, Eros, Eros*, pg105), responsibility is the fulfillment of our true or fundamental desire, what we irreducibly believe in (even if long forgotten).

Two Shambhala terms are helpful in understanding this responsibility. The first is the *sakyong principle*. When my son was seven years old, I showed him a photograph of a clear-cut forest and he burst into tears. He cried immediately, inconsolably and seemingly out of any proportion. The sakyong principle entered him, or emerged from him. From his heart. *Sakyong* means "earth protector," a term for the highest seat we could claim, one that is devoted to protecting the earth itself, and, or course, all he beings that live here. The sight of the destroyed forest - a sight of grotesque un-sustainability - evoked from my son an archetypal response of the deepest kind.

The tears of my son demonstrated not only sadness but a kind of tremendous potential energy - so much energy that I've never forgotten that moment! We must use the energy-awakeness of the unbidden heart to have the courage to journey toward taking our most deeply human seat as earth protector, Sakyong. It is seemingly only this kind of collective awakening that will save our planet from continued degradations and possible catastrophic collapse.

The unbidden energy we sometimes feel (perhaps only once in a lifetime) in or from our heart is something more than the constituents of our personality or the type of person we are trying to be. This energy is connected to the second pertinent Shambhala term, the *ridgen principle*. You could say that, although this primordial energy is not "elsewhere," it nevertheless originates from a kind of ultimate or unconditioned space (which all spiritual traditions attempt to evoke, understand or at least speak of). In the Shambhala tradition, it is not spoken of, or conceived of, as God, but as "The Rigidens," the highest form of non-dual intelligence or being. The Rigidens are not exactly separate from us, yet we can say - and experience! - that they want to *help us*.

Rigden means "possessing family heritage." Our heritage goes back through our mothers and fathers and every ancestral predecessor to the dawn of humanity. But even that is an arbitrary designator, because our genetic heritage not only continues back through apes, but to the the original

creatures of our earth's oceans, back to single cells, to carbon, to stardust. It is impossible *not* to possess this heritage, but our minds have acquired endless ideas and conditioning that ultimately makes us feel alone and alienated from any heritage at all. Existence, in the form of The Rigidens, and in every cell of life, does have an allegiance to helping us reunite with our true family heritage. The ultimate and highest dralas are the Rigidens themselves.

How exactly will the Rigidens help us? There is a simple process we must undertake and in the undertaking help arrives inseparable from the process and perhaps, for a long time, unnoticed. There are steps to the process, though not necessarily in this order:

I. We must recognize our response-ability (to separate the word into its obvious halves). Each of us has a unique ability to respond to our life experience and thus effect the world around us. Not everyone is equal, precisely because there is not a single "ability" to measure us all by. In hitting a tennis ball, some have more ability than others, but this is only one of infinite abilities to possess. Just as we are not all equal, none of us are particularly special, only unique. If each snowflake that has fallen since the beginning of snow is unique, how could each human (dog, cat, tree) not be?

The great Zen teacher Dogen said, "Everyone has all the provisions they need for their lifetime." Amidst injustice, deformity, starvation, war and poverty it hardly seems believable that we each have the provisions we need. The provisions Dogen spoke where the ones needed to wake up and waking up can never occur from material other than what we have, however awful. To recognize the material of our response-ability is a life-time process that is too infrequently tried.

As we do try to recognize and commit to our response-ability, the world offers a response - you could say the rigidens respond. Small forms of acknowledgment occur; accidents, synchronicities, threads of new possibility. The sense of "moving in the right direction" is palpable though not always tangible; it is a kind of real support that comes to our aid.

II. We must realize our privilege. Most of us living in the so-called first-world have tremendous privileges over the greater majority of human beings who live in the so-called third world. A hundred dollars does not necessarily mean a great deal in, say, middle-class United States, but in terms of the overall world economy where the majority of human beings make only a dollar or two a day - one-hundred dollars is a tremendous amount of money.

Strangely, we in the first-world often live far more in the grip of economic fear than our brothers and sisters making two-dollars a day. The mortgages, credit-card debt, home and automobile insurance policies (not to mention the homes and automobiles), the warranties, deeds of trust, legal contracts, iPod rebates, parking tickets, security clearances, credit

ratings, golf course memberships and orange juice coupons become a heaping pile of overhead we feel duty-bound and scared to death to do anything other than support. And thus our life force goes into supporting primarily these things, making us quite irresponsibly responsible.

That we could leverage our life in an entirely different way - and for very different purposes - is the point of realizing our privilege. Recognizing and acknowledging our privilege take courage because it begins to dissolve that sense that we are "special," that we are entitled to what we have and that it will always be there.

Quite simply put, the dralas do not prefer cowards, whereas any expression of the courage to become more vulnerable will potentially attract the dralas. Acknowledging our privilege means to become more vulnerable. The rigden principle - as the ultimate drala principle - is the self-existing sense of fearlessness we find in ourselves. As we become courageous we become anointed - or self-anointed - with courage - and the process of courage grows on itself.

III. We must begin to simplify and to risk. When we realize "luxury is experiencing reality," simplifying is not a hardship but something natural - and natural things tend to do very well if they are allowed to. Simplifying provides the ground to risk. Most of us in the first world have far more resources available to us than the vast majority of humanity. We not only have the possibility but the responsibility to risk some of our so-called security for benefit of finding and taking our seat and in turn, helping others.

IV. Supplicate for vision and support. If we are unwilling to simply, risk, renounce our privileges and assume responsibility it is unlikely it would occur to us to supplicate for a vision, much less receive one. Conversely, if we do have this willingness, we already have a vision; vision is surrender to what our heart desires. This is not the vision of ego, which are always "wants" that will make us comfortable. A vision will have its way with us, but it will also come with a curious way of providing the necessary provisions. Simply to supplicate into the unknown is a act of courage and a link with vision.

What is vision? It is the truth of the human heart, which exists in nowness outside of time and can never be discovered through hope and fear.