

*Gateway to the Vajrayana Path*

**Books by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö**

Gateway to the Vajrayana Path

Collected Notes 2012-2018

The Four Seals of Dharma

The Handbook for Life's Journey

Are You Ready for Happiness?

The Right View

Daily Inspirations from Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö

Gateway  
*to the*  
Vajrayana Path

*Demystifying the World of*

*Tantric Buddhism*

**Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche**

*Translated by*

*Dekyi Drolma and Lorraine Wu Chen*



LUMINOUS WISDOM SERIES

Larong Books, Inc.  
2/F, No. 1, Lane 27, Sec. 2, Da'an Road  
Taipei 106, Taiwan, R.O.C.

Copy right©2019 by Larong Culture Publishing.  
All rights reserved.

For more information about Larong publications, visit our website at  
www.larong-chuling.org or email: thinley.chodren@gmail.com

Printed in Taiwan  
Designed by

National Central Library Catalogue-in-Publication Data  
Tsultrim Lodrö, Khenpo  
Gateway to the Vajrayana Path - First Edition  
ISBN 978-986-97370-0-5

*Not for Sale*

## Contents

Author's Preface	7
A Note about the Author	9
Translators' Note	13
1. Entering the Vajrayana Path	15
2. Vajra Master and Empowerment	37
3. Sutra and Tantra: Similarities and Differences	61
4. Sutra and Tantra: Similarities and Differences — based on the view of Rongzom Pandita	81
5. Vajrayana Terminology	109
6. The Parable of a Black Snake	117
7. A Compendium of the Vajrayana	141
8. The Generation Stage	213
9. The Completion Stage — the skillful means to realize emptiness	235
10. How to Receive Empowerment	251
11. The Fourteen Root Tantric Vows	279
12. The Samaya Vows of the Guhyagarbha Tantra	303
13. The Binding Factors of Transgressing Tantric Vows and How to Repent	329
Glossary	345

## Author's Preface

In this early 21st century, man has succeeded in building an advanced material civilization with hands and brains, and along the way managed to overcome many of life's challenges. However, the fundamental question regarding cyclic existence remains an enigma which modern science is still scrambling to understand.

Great scientists like Newton, Einstein, and other luminaries all must succumb to the inevitable process going from life to death just like you and I, without exception. Science, as we know it today, is not the answer to our ultimate longing for absolute freedom from samsara. This true liberation is beyond the cycle of birth, aging, sickness and death; it is where life rests, the natural state where every living being will eventually return. Those masters who had already attained this enlightened state conducted their lives with such contentment and equanimity, and carried themselves with tremendous dignity and grace until the very end. They experienced no suffering nor harbored any negative thoughts. Because once mind is free from all obscurations, external influences of the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind) cease as well. Only then can true freedom and happiness be had.

To realize this ultimate ideal, man's self-awareness and inherent wisdom must be explored and developed. As for the critical questions regarding the origin and the nature of

cyclic existence, and the ways to go beyond its bounds, only the Dharma has the answers. For this reason, people from all walks of life really should familiarize themselves with Buddhist teachings somewhat. We believe that everyone can learn something valuable from it.

*Chengdu, Sichuan, China*

## **A Note about the Author**

Venerable Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö Rinpoche, a native of Draggo (Ch: Luhuo) County in Sichuan Province, is Vice Principal of Sethar Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Institute (Larung Gar), also a renowned contemporary Nyingma teacher of Tibetan Buddhism and a strong advocate of Tibetan culture.

At the age of twenty-two (1984), he received ordination at Larung Gar, becoming a disciple of the great contemporary spiritual master, H.H. Khenchen Jigme Phuntsok. Over more than two decades, he applied himself diligently to the studies of both the Buddhist sutric and tantric scriptures and assimilated all contents without difficulty. After years of effort and consecutive levels of strict examinations, he was personally awarded the Khenpo degree by H.H. Khenchen Jigme Phuntsok. The results of his practice also were verified face-to-face three times by his root teacher. From 1991 to 2013, Khenrinpoche held the appointed position of Dean of Education at Larung Gar, responsible for the training of a large cohort of outstanding monastic students capable of carrying on the lineage and spreading the Buddhadharma.

In addition, Khenrinpoche has long dedicated efforts to promote the ideas of non-killing, life release of living beings, vegetarianism, environmental protection, and the importance of education. His charitable endeavors include the establishment of libraries, nursing homes, and schools in the Tibetan

regions. With a view to protecting and advancing the Tibetan spoken and written language, in 2005 Khenrinpoche invited language experts and scholars from Tibetan regions across five provinces to come together in compiling Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary, while he himself assumed the role of the project's chief editor. The team has so far successfully published Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary, Chinese-Tibetan-English Visual Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary, and the Dictionary of Traditional Tibetan Words with Illustrations.

In recent years, Khenrinpoche has been invited to give lectures in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Canada, the USA, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, etc. His presentation is crisp and well organized, preferring to explain the profound in simple terms. Khenrinpoche is also good at referring to scientific examples and elucidating abstruse Buddhist doctrines using language that people today are familiar with, which is greatly appreciated by Buddhist followers and intellectuals alike.

Moreover, Khenrinpoche was invited as well for talks and scholarly discussions at prestigious academic institutions such as Harvard, Oxford, Stanford, UC Berkeley, Columbia, George Washington University, the University of Virginia, Toronto, Auckland, Sydney, and Melbourne, as well as at companies like Google, together with experts and scholars in the fields of science, philosophy, and psychology, discussing the mystery of life and the mind based on scientific and Buddhist principles.

Despite being an influential Buddhist master, Khenrinpoche is very modest and keeps a low profile, rarely draws attention to his own merit and spiritual attainment, instead focusing solely on the propagation of Dharma and ways to benefit sentient beings. His words and actions exemplify the ideal of a Mahayana practitioner, a real admirable teacher who braves all difficulties

to uphold the beacon of true Dharma in this degenerate age. Khenrinpoche once wrote in his blog on Weibo, "My lama once told me that the only purpose and the value of our lives is to cultivate and to give love. I will not forget this in my whole life, hopefully nor in all future lives."

Khenrinpoche diligently applies himself to writing when any spare moment presents itself on his continuous journey to spread the Dharma. Among all of his publications, the Luminous Wisdom series is acclaimed as a masterpiece of Buddhism which can stand the test of time. Its contents encompass both theory and practice, with rigorous sequencing, and seamlessly integrate both sutra and tantra. The series is practical and appropriate, and the style of the language is concise, powerful, incisive, and thorough, meeting the psychological needs of a contemporary readership. As a result, it has become widely accepted and immensely popular. For the broad population of Buddhist students and practitioners, it provides a clear beacon to illuminate the way to liberation.

#### **Publications to date:**

##### ***Tibetan:***

*Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö's Complete Collection - Four Volumes; Rain in Time; Contemporary Beats of the Dharma Drum; Conversations Between Eastern and Western Cultures*

##### ***Chinese:***

*Luminous Wisdom Series 1-10; Exhortations; Illuminating Insights (in Chinese/English); The Truth of Life; Buddhism—Superstition or Wisdom? Decipher the Mysterious Codes of Tibetan Buddhism; Unveil the Mysteries of Tibetan Buddhism; When Heart Sutra Meets Quantum Physics; Comprehending the Book Called Life; Deconstruct Vajrayana*

*Buddhism; Collected Notes 2012-2018 (in Chinese/English)*

**English:**

*The Right View; Are You Ready for Happiness? —Don't Let the Paper Tiger Scare You Off; The Handbook for Life's Journey; Daily Inspiration from Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö; The Four Seals of Dharma; Collected Notes, 2012-2018; Gateway to the Vajrayana Path*

## **Translators' Note**

It is said that the Buddhism of Tibet is perhaps the most complete form of Buddhism. It contains all the essential teachings of the various Buddhist traditions that are practiced in the world today—Hinayana (the vehicle of individual salvation), Mahayana (the vehicle of universal salvation), and Vajrayana (the vehicle of tantra). Vajrayana is the highest vehicle in the Tibetan tradition and is included within Mahayana. In *Gateway to the Vajrayana Path*, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche presents a complete overview of the profound tantric teachings. With great clarity, he also elucidates the similarities and differences between tantra and sutra in Buddhism.

Some people think Vajrayana Buddhism is very mysterious. This is because they lack an understanding of the Vajrayana system of thought and practice. Actually, it is not at all mysterious; it is just that the methods are very special, very fast, and relatively easy to practice. Many practitioners have great faith in tantra but are misinformed about important aspects of tantric practice such as the vajra master, empowerment, and precepts. To fully appreciate the richness of the Vajrayana path, these issues all need to be addressed.

This book is a compilation of many lectures given by Khenrinpoche on the key concepts and methods in Vajrayana Buddhism. Some themes are repeated in multiple places. People who are familiar with Rinpoche's style will recognize the same

sense of urgency and purpose in these teachings. Throughout the text, he calls attention to the importance of: first, establishing a firm foundation in renunciation and bodhicitta; second, progressing on the path in stages; third, taking empowerment with a qualified master and upholding the vows that are an inseparable part of the empowerment; fourth, seeing the view of tantra and the view of sutra to be harmonious, not contradictory. The essential points in the book are certain to give all practitioners on the path of enlightenment a deeper understanding of the progressive views in the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma, and the impediments to a successful practice.

We are most grateful to Khenrinpoche for making this book possible and for his guidance during the course of the translation. A special thanks also to Thubten Norbu Rinpoche for his assistance in the explanation of particular terminologies, and Thinley Chodron for her very helpful suggestions in bringing the book to publication.

It is our sincere hope that all who read this English edition gain insight into the profound nature of reality and, with this understanding, find genuine happiness and peace of mind.

Dekyi Drolma  
Lorraine Wu Chen

*Taipei, Taiwan*  
*May 2019*

## Entering the Vajrayana Path

Some people think Vajrayana Buddhism is very mysterious. This is because they lack an understanding of the Vajrayana system of thought and practice. In fact, it is not at all mysterious; it is just that the methods are very special, very fast, and relatively easy to practice. To comply with the teachings, a Vajrayana practitioner should progress along the path from aspiration to attainment of buddhahood in stages as follows.

### **THE FOUNDATION OF VAJRAYANA PRACTICE— RENUNCIATION AND BODHICITTA**

We have mentioned many times before that renunciation and bodhicitta are the basis of Vajrayana practice. Why is it necessary to reiterate this point here? Because they are the prerequisite a practitioner must have; without renunciation and bodhicitta, no benefit is to be derived from undertaking even the very sacred Vajrayana tantras such as Dzogchen—the Great Perfection. Only with renunciation and bodhicitta as a foundation can one formally enter Vajrayana practice.

Patrul Rinpoche once said: “If renunciation and bodhicitta are absent, a person cannot sow the seeds of liberation even after nine years of Dzogchen retreat.” We ought to reflect deeply on this statement: it is the most sublime Dzogchen that one spends not a few days or several months but nine years to



practice; in terms of methodology, it is undertaken in retreat away from any contact with the world outside; despite this, one cannot sow the seeds of liberation because one does not have renunciation and bodhicitta. This should be enough of a warning. Without renunciation and bodhicitta, we may find ourselves in a position wherein the cause of liberation cannot be established even after nine years of Dzogchen practice! Thus, renunciation and bodhicitta are extremely important to any practitioner.

Lacking this understanding, a lot of people only know that the Vajrayana path is sacred and unsurpassed. They aim high and delude themselves in thinking they can get there without practicing the preliminaries. Exhausted in the rush to receive all kinds of Vajrayana empowerment and fully engaged in the practice of tantra, their effort is nonetheless wasted in the end, their attainment barely noticeable. This is not the fault of Vajrayana Buddhism, but the result of not laying a firm foundation for the practice. Therefore, Vajrayana followers must have renunciation and bodhicitta. It is the foundation common to sutra and tantra, and the main precondition to undertaking any practice.

All the practices in Highest Yoga Tantra, without exception, place great emphasis on renunciation and bodhicitta. At the generation stage, for instance, one may have a very clear image of the buddha during visualization, but without compassion and the correct view of emptiness, it is meaningless. Similarly, the sutras say there is nothing special in reciting the deity mantras 100,000,000 times if one does not have renunciation and bodhicitta. Thus, the critical factor in all the practices is renunciation and bodhicitta. Lacking a proper foundation as well as an understanding of the generation and completion stage, many lay followers now blindly recite the liturgy of some yidam practice in the hope of gaining something from the endeavor. It

is necessary here to remind everyone this is not very meaningful.

The sutra and tantra paths are consistent in expounding all phenomena are a product of our aspiration. In *Gateway to Training the Mind* by Chengawa Lodrö Gyaltzen (1402–1472), it is said if a person is practicing the Dharma, releasing animals from bondage, and making offerings to the sangha and the buddhas all in the hope of living well in this lifetime, the outcome can be no more than that, even if his expectations are met; if his expectations are not met due to his past negative karma, these virtuous activities cannot in any case lead to supramundane retributions. This is because during the course of practice, he has never considered achieving liberation, benefiting sentient beings, realizing buddhahood or the like, only attaining happiness and prosperity in this lifetime. Since the motivation is so obvious, how can his virtuous actions possibly become the cause of liberation?

The sutras also have this kind of analogy: a person is on the verge of death owing to extreme hunger and will, without food, die in a few minutes. If at this point he is allowed to go to the king's palace and given a choice of treasures, what should he choose first? Definitely food. Because none of the treasures, however valuable, can solve his problem. They are useless to him at the moment. Similarly, the generation and completion stage practices are very sacred, but they are too profound for someone without a foundation in renunciation and bodhicitta. At present, we do not need to take up these practices; the urgent task at hand is still to cultivate renunciation and bodhicitta.

Another analogy is this: in ancient times, most of the towns in the East and West are surrounded by a wall; one must enter the town through a gate. If the town only has one gate, a person who wants to go into town must enter through this gate. Many families live in the town; once inside, the person is free to visit any family. However, if the person does not pass through this

gate, he can only stay outside and never get in. Renunciation and bodhicitta are the same—they are the only entrance to practice. After cultivating renunciation and bodhicitta, we are free to take up Dzogchen, Mahamudra, Kalacakra, or the generation and completion stage practices. Without renunciation and bodhicitta, it would be foolish to think we can succeed in any of these practices.

Thus, instead of chasing after the more advanced tantric practices now, we ought first to generate a resolute and unwavering heart of renunciation. An occasional thought of renunciation is not reliable; our practice must be repeated over and over again so that it does not regress. There is only one way to generate renunciation, that is, by practicing the four outer preliminaries—precious human birth, the impermanence of all phenomena, and so on.

What qualifies as renunciation? In *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, the great master Tsongkhapa said: “The thought of attaining liberation, day and night without interruption, is renunciation.” This is a relatively high standard that is difficult to comply with right away. We will thus propose a lower standard of renunciation for now.

A person without renunciation only seeks satisfaction in this lifetime, and rebirth in the human or god realm; apart from being content with his lot in life, and getting by, he does not have a loftier goal. A person with renunciation may occasionally think the same way or enjoy good food, fine clothes, and a nice home. However, deep inside, he knows: this is not the purpose of my existence, merely a temporary lifestyle and means to an end which may or may not be necessary—my ultimate goal is to attain liberation. This way of thinking is basically considered renunciation. To sum up, a Vajrayana practitioner must first generate a heart of renunciation.

Next is cultivating bodhicitta. Here it is necessary to

emphasize once again bodhicitta is essential to a Vajrayana practitioner. Without bodhicitta, there are no bodhisattva precepts. Some of the Vajrayana schools hold that, in the absence of bodhisattva precepts, empowerment cannot be attained; there can be no Vajrayana precepts either. Among the three types of precepts, the lower level serves as the basis of the next level up. That is, the pratimoksa precepts are the foundation of the bodhisattva precepts; without the pratimoksa precepts, there can be no bodhisattva precepts. The bodhisattva precepts are the foundation of the Vajrayana precepts; without the bodhisattva precepts, there can be no Vajrayana precepts. Hence, bodhicitta is also indispensable on the Vajrayana path.

In the absence of bodhicitta, even if we recite the deity mantras billion-plus times, we may take rebirth as a fierce ghost or devil-like being with special powers if our aspiration and method of practice are incorrect. In this case, a similar outcome is also possible when in visualization we create the image of the deity, especially a wrathful deity, as clearly as seeing the deity in person. Some people frequently visualize the wrathful deity and recite its mantra headlong with the intention of cursing or taming others; these actions are entirely misplaced. Although unlikely, a person may descend into the ghost realm if he does not undertake the generation stage practice the right way. However, this cannot happen if one has cultivated bodhicitta or realized emptiness. Thus, bodhicitta and the view of emptiness are also an integral part of the generation stage practice of Vajrayana.

The profound significance of renunciation and bodhicitta can be realized only through direct personal experience and actual practice, not just by listening and contemplation. I have always hoped all of us can understand we don't necessarily have to practice the generation and completion stage, but renunciation and bodhicitta we must develop. Even if we have

not realized Dzogchen, recited the deity mantra more than 100,000,000 times, or attained a clear visualization during the generation stage practice, no one will say we are not Buddhist practitioners; without renunciation and bodhicitta, however, we are truly not Buddhist practitioners!

I once came upon this story in which a scholar crossing the river on a boat asked the boatman, “Do you understand mathematics?” The boatman replied he did not. “Then you have wasted half your life!” He proceeded to ask, “Do you understand philosophy?” The boatman said he did not. “In that case you have again wasted half your life!” Along the way, the boat broke down in the middle of the river at which point the boatman asked, “Do you know how to swim?” The scholar replied he did not. The boatman said, not without regret, “Then you have wasted your entire life!”

In the same way, even if it seems we have missed out on a lot by not undertaking the generation or completion stage practice, in reality we have not. Conversely, without renunciation and bodhicitta, we have truly lost everything since we have not even entered the door to practice. Therefore, these two fundamental aspirations are extremely important.

## STAGES IN TANTRIC PRACTICE

The practice of tantra can be undertaken when a person has a firm foundation in renunciation and bodhicitta. The great Nyingma master Rongzom Pandita divided the process from initial aspiration to final attainment of buddhahood into five stages.

**Stage one is taking refuge in the Vajrayana guru.** Tantra cannot be understood or practiced just by reading the texts. For instance, the specific terms used in tantra are basically incomprehensible to people in general; moreover, to mislead

and prevent non-Buddhists from stealing these methods, the practices appear in many of the tantras in the wrong order—the last practice in front, the first practice in back; without a guru to guide us, the outcome of blindly following the texts on our own is unthinkable. We look to the sangha to guide us in thought and practice even in sutra, let alone in the sacred and unsurpassed tantra. Thus, the first step is to take refuge in the guru.

Presently, some lay people study and follow the teachings in the tantric texts entirely on their own; this is a very serious transgression. In the end, nothing can be attained; in misappropriating the practices, a wrongdoing is also committed.

As for the qualifications of a Vajrayana guru, these are clearly prescribed in *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, and other teachings about vajra masters. It is my hope that you read these texts carefully before taking refuge in the guru.

**Stage two is receiving empowerment.** According to tantric regulation in the past, the four stages of empowerment—vase, secret, wisdom-knowledge, and precious word—are given separately in accordance with a person’s capacity; the practitioner receives the empowerment consistent with his or her level of practice and does not lightly overstep this rule.

Today, in many initiations of the Highest Yoga Tantra, the four empowerments are conferred at the same time. Although this is understandable, we must nevertheless consider our specific situation and choose the empowerment that is most appropriate for us. Currently, there are many problems with the initiations, especially in areas populated by the Chinese. This topic is addressed in the “Vajra Master and Empowerment” chapter in this book; related issues are also covered by Mipham Rinpoche in his *Essence of Clear Light*. They shall not be repeated here.

**Stage three is receiving the Vajrayana precepts.** Actually,

receiving empowerment is the same as receiving the Vajrayana precepts; however, Rongzom Pandita separated this practice into two stages—first entering the Vajrayana mandala, next receiving the precepts.

Before receiving the Vajrayana precepts, we must understand what they are, then decide whether or not to receive them. That is to say, before receiving empowerment, we must first obtain the precepts manual, read through the precepts that relate to the empowerment, next determine whether or not we can comply with them. If we are certain we can follow the precepts, only then can empowerment be conferred; otherwise, no.

This is true with all precepts. For instance, lay practitioners also need to examine which of the lay precepts they can comply with before receiving them. As for the bodhisattva precepts, practitioners of slight capacity only need to uphold aspiration bodhicitta, the other precepts not just yet; practitioners of middling capacity can receive the four root precepts (eight separate precepts) prescribed by Asanga, the rest at a later time; practitioners of great capacity can receive the twenty root precepts (also said to be eighteen precepts) prescribed by Nagarjuna. The Vajrayana precepts are the same way. The sure guarantee of protecting and maintaining the precepts is to do what one is capable of.

However, what troubles me is that not much emphasis is placed on the Vajrayana precepts by the conferrer of empowerment during the ceremony. Practitioners are basically not even aware of the requirement to uphold Vajrayana precepts after the empowerment; when the ceremony is over, they think their work is done. Actually, the most difficult task after empowerment is upholding the Vajrayana precepts.

***Stage four is listening and contemplating.*** This is an extremely crucial step. One must first become familiar with the

viewpoints unique to Vajrayana, then proceed with the actual practice.

***Stage five is practicing in a quiet place.*** The above are the five stages in tantric practice that Rongzom Pandita expounded. In the following, we shall mainly introduce the fifth stage—understanding and practicing tantra.

## UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICING TANTRA

All tantric practices fall into two categories: one is generation stage, the other is completion stage. These are explained separately as follows.

### ***Generation Stage***

In the generation stage, the image of a yidam and a buddha realm, or mandala, is visualized. What use is this? Ordinary people are clouded by ignorance; thus, all that we perceive are deemed impure phenomena. The tantric view allows us to come to the realization that everything is unreal, illusory, and fundamentally pure.

The sutra system also holds that the world perceived by a bodhisattva on the eighth ground, or eighth bhumi, is pure. How is it pure? In *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras* (*Māhayānasūtrālamkāra*), one of Maitreya's five treatises, it is stated: "On the eighth ground, the bodhisattva begins to transform consciousness into wisdom; when the transformation of the five-sense consciousness into wisdom is complete, the world outside is likened to Western Pure Land; the ground is no longer comprised of soil, stone, tile or gravel, but lapis lazuli, precious gems, etc." Actually, the so-called ground of "lapis lazuli" that people have in mind is also tainted; but because people like lapis lazuli and other such gems, Pure

Land is described this way to accord with their liking. In reality, everything in the world of the bodhisattva is a manifestation of wisdom and purity: the sounds are wondrous, the food is nectar..... Naturally, anything which is communicated through words is categorized as discriminating thought; it cannot truly describe the state in which the bodhisattva abides.

“One who drinks it knows best whether the water is hot or cold.” In the sutra system, to truly experience all this, a person must generate bodhicitta first, undertake the practices in sutra at length, accumulate infinite merit, realize no-self/emptiness, and attain the state of the eighth bhumi and above; only then can the person through his or her own practice apprehend all phenomena are primordially pure. In the tantra system, however, even an ordinary person can experience the state of intrinsic purity by undertaking the special tantric practices. What accounts for the difference?

In the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, there is this story:

Once, in an assembly of bodhisattvas, Sakyamuni Buddha said, “To experience the purity of external phenomena, all of you should purify your minds. When the mind is pure, the environment is pure; when the mind is purified through practice, the environment also becomes purified.” At the time, the Venerable Sariputra was also next to the Buddha; he thought: the Saha world is so impure, could it be the Buddha’s mind is still impure?

Knowing this thought on his mind, the Buddha turned to Sariputra and said, “A person who is blind at birth cannot see the sun or moon, is this the fault of the sun and moon, or the blind person?” Sariputra replied, “It is the blind person’s fault, not the sun or moon; because the blind person cannot see, not because the sun and moon do not exist.” The Buddha then said, “The essence of the Saha world is always pure, but ordinary people, like the blind, have never been able to see it.”

At this time, a bodhisattva who had come from another buddha field to hear the Dharma said, “Everything I see in this buddha field is pure.” Disapprovingly, Sariputra retorted, “This buddha field is not pure!” Hence, the two opened up an intense debate.

When neither side would give in, the Buddha utilized his extraordinary power to reveal the true face of the Saha world. Everyone in the assembly bore witness: the Saha world, like Western Pure Land and all other buddha fields, is perfectly pure and sublime.

The Buddha then told the assembly, “My world is basically this way, and will always be this way; only you have not recognized it.”

This scripture, a sutra by classification, also refers to the view that “the world is inherently pure.” Clearly, the concept of basic purity is espoused not just in tantra.

Rongzom Pandita once said that the Hinayana scriptures also record how Sakyamuni Buddha formed aspiration and attained buddhahood, and how the bodhisattvas practiced, achieved perfect enlightenment, and benefitted sentient beings. However, lacking the corresponding methods, practitioners on this path cannot attain buddhahood or realize the state of the bodhisattva.

The sutra system is the same way; it talks about the basic purity of the world, but practitioners below the eighth bhumi cannot experience it. The tantra system, on the other hand, has the generation stage practice that is simple and direct. After apprehending all phenomena are intrinsically pure, one can by way of this method gradually eliminate impure phenomena and fully experience this kind of purity. An ordinary person who undertakes the generation stage practice can also attain its highest level of realization: upon completion of the practice, the external world naturally manifests as a pure buddha realm;

this is a state ordinary tantric practitioners can all actualize.

Why is the generation stage practice necessary? Because we take all things that our five sense organs come into contact with to be impure. If things were fundamentally impure, we would have no way out. But in reality, all phenomena are fundamentally pure. That being the case, is there an expedient method that allows the inherent purity of the world to manifest? As explained above, this method exists, not in sutra, but in tantra. That is the significance of the generation stage practice.

### ***Completion Stage***

What function does the completion stage serve? A person who is accomplished in the generation stage can perceive all external phenomena as a buddha realm. However, in the absence of realizing emptiness, he or she will again cling to the buddha realm as real. Although all phenomena appear pure at this time, the attachment to purity is not unlike the attachment to impurity; it is still an attachment and has to be discarded. How can it be discarded? This is where the completion stage practice comes in.

The completion stage can be divided into two kinds: with marks and without marks.

Most of the completion stage practices in the Gelug and Sakya schools are with marks. It is the practice of working with the winds, channels, and essences of the subtle body, like that in Kalacakra.

Why can one realize emptiness by working with these elements within the body? In his teaching on Kalacakra, Mipham Rinpoche said that if you imagine having a headache when there is no pain in your head, you will definitely get a headache after a day or two of practice; this is a function of the mind, but it does not happen quickly. If on the other hand

someone hits you on the head with a stick, you will feel the pain in your head right there and then.

This analogy tells us although in sutra we can rely on the logic presented in *Introduction to the Middle Way* and *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* to overcome self-attachment, the progress is very slow, the result imperceptible; to attain the first bhumi, the initial level at which emptiness is truly realized, an ordinary person would need an asamkhyeya kalpa (countless kalpas). This is a concept of time so long it cannot even be measured.

In tantra, however, we can realize emptiness quickly by working with the winds, channels, and essences of the body. Why is this possible? Because our mind and body are intimately linked; by way of this practice, we are able to effect a decisive change in the mind.

Through the visualization and practice of the generation stage, we can indeed perceive all external phenomena and sentient beings as a buddha realm. But after realizing emptiness through the completion stage practice, we are able to understand these things do not truly exist; even though the buddha realm is still there, it is illusory like a dream. That is the significance of the completion stage practice.

The completion stage without marks refers primarily to Dzogchen, also in part to the *Kalacakra Tantra* and others. With this practice, the practitioner does not rely on visualizing deities or working with the winds, channels, and essences of the body, but directly realizes emptiness. How is this any different from the realization of emptiness in sutra? As previously mentioned, the sutra system is likened to the thought of getting a headache; it depends entirely on logical reasoning to gradually realize emptiness. The tantra system, especially Dzogchen, enables an ordinary person in the early stage of generating bodhicitta and traversing the tantric path to experience emptiness, not in

countless kalpas, but in just a lifetime, even a few months or years. In sutra, emptiness is an intellectual concept; in tantra, emptiness is a personal experience—for this reason, one progresses with extraordinary speed.

Dzogchen includes the completion stage without marks, as well as the generation stage. However, the generation stage in Dzogchen is not a visualization practice in which the buddha realm is perceived from outside; instead, through meditative concentration, the buddha realm manifests from inside the mind. It is completely uncontrived and naturally pure.

Although the visualization of a thangka can eliminate some impure appearances, there is still an element of fabrication because the thangka is man-made. For instance, let us shine a light on the top half of the thangka so that the top half is relatively light, the bottom half relatively dark; then let this thangka be the object of our visualization. Once the practice of the generation stage is accomplished, the deity or mandala that appears will also be relatively light at the top, relatively dark at the bottom.

This tells us that the generation stage entails some fabrication. Be that as it may, it can nonetheless eliminate our attachment to things that are impure. As an example, a bar of soap itself is not clean and eventually gets washed up; nevertheless, we can use it to clean both our hands. Similarly, the generation stage involves a certain degree of fabrication, but that which is fabricated can also eliminate impure phenomena, so it is useful to us now.

Dzogchen is different. In the practice of Dzogchen, it is not necessary to look at the image of a buddha, or visualize the buddha, the deity's features, form, mudra....; it is only necessary to attain meditative concentration. The nature of all phenomena is never separate from emptiness, nor is it ever separate from appearance; while practicing clear light in the state of samadhi,

the appearance aspect can break out spontaneously—that which manifests is a pure and uncontrived buddha realm. Dzogchen does not make a special effort to practice the generation stage, but it achieves an objective which actually surpasses that of the generation stage practice. Accordingly, Dzogchen contains all the practices of the generation and completion stage.

The concept of generation stage and completion stage is introduced above. Although the various schools of Vajrayana Buddhism have different practices, each special in its own right, all of the practices fall within these two categories.

The stages of tantric practice in general are as explained; however, because of external conditions, time, and other factors, we may not necessarily progress in that order; indeed, Dzogchen is often undertaken directly after completing the sets of preliminary practices including the generation of renunciation and bodhicitta. This is because Dzogchen is not practiced exclusively by monastics or highly realized masters. A lay follower of Vajrayana Buddhism who has a strong foundation in the preliminaries can also practice Dzogchen and work at the same time.

## **HOW SUTRA AND THE TWO STAGES OF TANTRA DIFFER IN PRACTICE**

In the sutra system, there are no generation or completion stage practices. Lacking the concepts and skillful methods that are unique to these two stages, the effect and progress of the practice in sutra is very different from tantra even though its ultimate fruition is the same.

The sutras say even a practitioner of highest capacity will need an asamkhyeya kalpa to attain realization of the first bhumi. Actually, it does not take that long, because a bodhisattva on a certain level of realization has all kinds of methods, each

of which can accumulate a great deal of merit; as one moves up along the paths of accumulation and preparation, the ability to gather merit increases such that in an instant the accumulation can reach an incalculable level. Despite this, the path from generating aspiration to arriving at the first bhumi is still a long one. Tantra is different. With all the prerequisites in place, the path of preparation only takes six months to complete, the path of accumulation is not very long either; a practitioner can arrive at the first bhumi within a time period that is not possible in sutra. Although sutra does not concede this point, substantial evidence shows tantra indeed has this advantage.

At what juncture does the discrepancy in sutra and tantra disappear? A person who has attained realization of the first bhumi in sutra has in fact also attained realization in tantra. After the first bhumi, sutra and tantra are one and the same. The so-called advantage in tantra exists only in the paths of accumulation and preparation, before arriving at bhumi. In other words, prior to attaining realization of the first bhumi, there is indeed a substantial difference between sutra and tantra; after arriving at bhumi, there is no difference at all.

For instance, there is no concept of vajra body in sutra, let alone its practice; this is a unique practice in tantra. In the context of tantra, a person's body is not pure, but there are still some pure elements within it. If these elements can be harnessed and allowed to ripen, the tainted physical body will gradually disintegrate at the time the elements mature. When it disappears completely, the physical body is transformed into a vajra body, which is impervious to all external conditions—earth, water, fire, and wind.

But a practitioner who has attained realization of the first bhumi in sutra actualizes the illusory body, also called vajra body, immediately after coming out of the first bhumi meditation. Even though he or she has never practiced the generation stage,

having realized clear light, the illusory body arises naturally. Thus, from the first bhumi up, there is no difference between sutra and tantra. A practitioner in sutra on the first bhumi level and up eventually enters the tantric path as a matter of course.

Longchenpa, Mipham Rinpoche, and many other masters believed since there is no difference between sutra and tantra after the first bhumi, a practitioner of low capacity can also upon realization enter the tantric path. Mipham Rinpoche and others further maintained it is possible for a practitioner in sutra to take up tantric practices even during the greater path of accumulation. This is because a person on the greater path of accumulation can during meditation go to all the buddha fields to hear the Dharma. There the tantric teachings are also given and can therefore be practiced.

Is there any difference in the fruition in sutra and tantra? Both sutra and tantra culminate in the attainment of buddhahood, but one is much faster than the other. Although some say there is a difference in the fruition, Padmasambhava and many accomplished masters maintained there is no difference; one can attain buddhahood either way.

The practice of illusory body in tantra is a very special one, but the Nyingma tradition places even greater emphasis on rainbow body. The illusory body is of two types, pure and impure; the pure illusory body is essentially the rainbow body. As explained previously, in Dzogchen, although a practitioner has never visualized a thangka, the mandala of the five Buddha-families can suddenly manifest at the moment the state of realization reaches ultimate perfection. At this point, all external objects are perceived as pure phenomena, the physical body is also gradually transformed into the rainbow body. This rainbow body can lead directly to buddhahood, and ultimately to actualizing the sambhogakaya.

Through the completion stage without marks practice,



we can realize the emptiness expounded by Nagarjuna in *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*; through the generation stage or completion stage practice, we can fully realize all that is elucidated by Maitreya in *The Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra* and by Nagarjuna in *Praise to the Dharmadhatu*.

Some people think Vajrayana Buddhism is very mysterious. This is because they lack an understanding of the Vajrayana system of thought and practice. In fact, it is not at all mysterious; it is just that the methods are very special, very fast, and relatively easy to practice. For instance, the view of Hinayana Buddhism is not at a very high level, so there are many precepts for the bhikshu, even more for the bhikshuni; to uphold all of the precepts, down to even the minor ones, is very difficult. The rules are strict because of the view.

The bodhisattva precepts are different. In Mahayana Buddhism, the view is more profound and broader in the scope of its application, so there are fewer rules. The bodhisattva is concerned not only with the self but also with others; given the motivation to benefit others, it is not necessary to be overly cautious; instead, with more flexibility on all sides, the goal of benefitting sentient beings can be accomplished with even greater skill and ease.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, if we have already gained realization of the tantric view, the tantric precepts to be applied are not as strict as in sutra; this too is closely tied to the view. It is another matter if we have not gained realization of the view. Tantric practice is easy to do, the precepts are also flexible, yet progress along the path is especially swift—that is the uniqueness of tantra.

Most people do not have an opportunity to study tantra; they read a book or two but may not necessarily be able to take in everything at a glance. Thus, I have only focused on the main points here and used simple everyday language to describe the

practices in the hope that all of you gain a rough idea of the tantric path.

## THE CONDITIONS LEADING TO ENLIGHTENMENT

The specific generation stage and completion stage practices will not be discussed at this point. In the actual practice, there is no rush to start the tantric practices; the most important task at hand is to establish a solid foundation in renunciation and bodhicitta. This is particularly true of bodhicitta, which is easy to talk about but difficult to cultivate. As long-time students of Buddhism who are also relatively diligent, we have yet to perfect relative bodhicitta. Thus, bodhicitta is indeed difficult to attain.

If we recite the prayers for generating bodhicitta 100,000 times, does that imply we have perfected relative bodhicitta? Definitely not! Although the recitation of the prayers has its blessings and merit, it is not the criterion for having aroused bodhicitta.

To occasionally think “I want to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings” is easy, but to put this thought into practice every day in life is not easy. Although in daily meditation or normal times, we are also sincere in generating the vow to help others, at critical moments, we may not see “bodhicitta” in our actions. As an example, when people find that helping others is possible only at their own expense, many hesitate, even back away from the idea. Where is our bodhicitta then? It has long since disappeared.

A bodhisattva must be able to serve beings unconditionally. Can we do that? How many people can give that guarantee with a clear conscience? Therefore, we must never make light of renunciation or bodhicitta, thinking there is a better method out there. Renunciation and bodhicitta are the supreme practices that surpass all others.

In the past, the great masters would at first only transmit the practice of renunciation to their disciples, and tell them, “There is no better method than this, so you should practice with great effort.” The disciples also firmly believed this to be the only path to liberation; by practicing strictly in accordance with the teachings, they succeeded eventually in cultivating true and stable renunciation.

At that point, the guru would again tell the disciples, “Over and above renunciation, there is another practice that is unexcelled called bodhicitta. This you should practice!” Knowing their place, the disciples did not hesitate to follow the guru’s instructions; with complete focus on this practice, they succeeded ultimately in cultivating true bodhicitta.

Finally, the guru would say, “All this is good and well, but there is another matter that remains unresolved—it is emptiness. After practicing emptiness, there is truly nothing that surpasses it.” Hence, the disciples again relied on the teachings in tantra or sutra to practice emptiness. With a good foundation in place already, realization of emptiness was only a matter of time.

“A man of great skill acts like an idiot; a man of great wisdom behaves like a fool.” The disciples who did not play tricks or try to get smart, who had absolute faith in the words of the guru—only they could tap into the wondrous state that is essentially the guru’s wisdom.

Some people who boast of having sharp faculties may dismiss this approach; they believe these practices are meant for people of low capacity and therefore decide on their own to enter the main practices of tantra. After years of practice, there is nothing to show for it; not only that, even the original faith in the practice is gone. When they consider themselves in the right and do not place importance on paving a foundation for the practice, their effort is to no avail. Some lay people will say proudly, “So-and-so has already granted me permission to skip

the preliminaries, so I do not need to practice them.” Here, I must remind you this so-called permission is equivalent to saying you do not have to take the path of liberation. If you cannot attain liberation in the end, of what value is this permission?

In Serpa (Garze Prefecture, Sichuan), there used to be a highly accomplished Dzogchen master called Chogyam Rongdro, who also strongly believed in giving teachings to followers in stages. People who were there three to four years already had yet to receive teachings from him personally. They just received instructions from other khenpos on taking refuge, renunciation, and other methods, and undertook actual practice. When renunciation and bodhicitta were firmly established, only then would the master transmit and expound Dzogchen.

During the Cultural Revolution, the disciples who had developed genuine renunciation and bodhicitta took slight interest in secular matters, and were instead spared of the prospect of beatings and persecution; many retreated to the mountains just to practice. With the passage of time, some decades later, most of the disciples passed away; surprisingly—almost all exhibited signs of different levels of accomplishment. Although this can all be attributed to the special blessings that Chogyam Rongdro granted, it is also very closely connected with the emphasis he placed on paving the proper foundation.

If teachers persist in only expounding the advanced practices, lay followers will also take every possible measure to receive the empowerments at the earliest—to study the texts that can only be read after the empowerment. After understanding all the contents, they will still pursue a so-called “even higher” practice and discard the basics. This way of attending to the superficial and neglecting the essentials is not different from looking for fish in the trees. They have only themselves to blame for the final outcome.

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

Renunciation and bodhicitta, and realization of emptiness complement each other; they are inseparable like one's own shadow. It is essential that we take account of their importance. We should know that one can arrive at ultimate truth only after genuine renunciation and bodhicitta are developed!

## Vajra Master and Empowerment

In Tibet, people generally understand what vajra masters and empowerment are. However, many lay practitioners elsewhere are seriously misinformed about these two subjects. Not knowing the correct way, they blindly follow some Vajrayana teachers and receive empowerment indiscriminately; this relatively common phenomenon has led to unfavorable consequences.

The two main problems are: first, it causes major obstacles for Vajrayana followers in their personal practice; second, it has a negative impact on the whole of Tibetan Buddhism and Vajrayana, causing people from all levels of society, Buddhists or not, to misunderstand what Tibetan Buddhism is about. Therefore, we need to address these two subjects.

### VAJRA MASTER

Firstly, are monastics from Tibet clad in maroon robes all qualified to be vajra masters? Does the title of Rinpoche or Khenpo automatically make them a vajra master? Not necessarily. What type of person qualifies as a vajra master? What are the prerequisites of a sutrayana master in Theravada and Mahayana?

Some may think that they do not need to know these qualifications since they are not going to be vajra masters themselves. You may not be a vajra master one day, but you will

become a disciple of one and when you do, you should choose a genuine vajra master.

### ***The Reason to be Selective of Masters***

To establish a disciple-master relationship is a very important step for the initiates of Buddhist practice. Precious time will be wasted if you are led astray by improperly taking someone as a master. Life is short already. To encounter the Dharma within this short period of time is difficult; to encounter a truly qualified vajra master is more difficult; to be able to follow the vajra master and properly practice the Dharma afterwards is extremely difficult. As you can see, one may face mounting difficulties in the course of seeking the genuine Dharma. Nevertheless, if one wishes to learn the Buddhadharmā, one had better learn the right teachings and take the right path.

Buddhism is like a supermarket with plenty to offer. The *Guhya garbha Tantra* of the Nyingma tradition states that Buddhism can be divided into five vehicles (yanas): Human and Celestial Beings (vehicle of seekers of fortune and bliss in the human and god realm respectively), Sravakayana, Pratyekabuddhayana, Bodhisattvayana, and Vajrayana. Whatever and however one seeks to practice the Dharma, various modes of practice can be found in Buddhism to suit each one's aspiration. As in a supermarket where one can pick and choose freely, there are different levels of practice in Buddhism, from the worldly to the sublime, up to the incomparable Great Perfection, available for selection at one's own discretion. Although the wish of the buddhas and bodhisattvas is for everyone to practice for the attainment of liberation instead of worldly benefit, it is only a wish on their part. They will not force everyone to practice Vajrayana, nor Mahayana or Theravada for that matter, because sentient beings differ in their

capacity. Is one method sufficient to bring all out of samsara? Apparently not. It is precisely for this reason that the Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma three times, and transmitted eighty-four thousand teachings. There would be no need for all of these if one method alone could work its magic.

Humanistic Buddhism pioneered by Venerable Master Taixu does not epitomize all the Buddhist teachings either. It advocates the establishment of charitable organizations for social welfare, saving animals or helping needy people resolve problems encountered in daily life. These types of virtuous deeds are the practice of the Human and Celestial Beings Vehicle as well as the activities of the bodhisattvas. Not only do the bodhisattvas not oppose such acts, they highly praise all the activities that can benefit sentient beings, including but not limited to propagating the Dharma and inspiring others to practice. Whether these virtuous deeds are the activities of the bodhisattvas or that of a more worldly nature is determined solely by one's motivation.

Nowadays, many lay people proclaim themselves to be students of the Buddha. But what of the Buddha have they learned? Most lay practitioners, ranging from intellectuals and business people down to the old ladies in the villages, practice the Dharma as a way of cultivating worldly blessings. Their motivation to practice, take refuge, and undertake the five precepts is to obtain good health, longevity, a smooth career, successful business, and so on for themselves, and a chance to enter a good university or get a promising job for their children. Are they following the way of the Buddha? The Buddha never did any of these. We all know that after the Buddha aroused bodhicitta, he never once sought worldly benefit for himself during the incalculable eons of three asamkhyeya kalpas. This mode of "learning the way of the Buddha" conforms more to learning the Dharma. The meaning of the Sanskrit word *dharma*

encompasses all mundane and supramundane phenomena. In the context of practicing the right Dharma, *dharma* denotes an ability to deliver sentient beings from all suffering, and can be translated literally as “that which upholds.” It is in accord with the meaning of *dharma* if people practicing the Vehicle of Human and Celestial Beings enjoy the resulting blessings and take rebirth in the higher realms. Thus, undertaking virtuous deeds for the purpose of obtaining worldly benefits is not considered learning the Buddha’s way but learning the Dharma. Today, many self-proclaimed Buddhists maintain this kind of motivation.

As for the rest of the practitioners, some seek their own liberation. Although we all like to claim to be Mahayana practitioners, in reality, many of us only practice to liberate ourselves. Things like practicing the preliminaries, liberating animals, burning incense, and performing prostrations are all done for the purpose of accumulating merit for ourselves. These activities are not much different from working or handling family affairs: working is for our own living, not others’; practicing the five preliminaries and listening to teachings are for our own liberation, not others’ either. Everything is done for our own sake.

Only a small percentage of people are truly concerned with the welfare of others, not their own. One analogy in the sutras is as follows: Sow grains to reap grains, but straws need not be sown as it can be reaped without volition. (Sowing grains is likened to the bodhisattvas’ practice of the six perfections; grains, the welfare of sentient beings; and straws, the welfare of one’s own). Another analogy is: Make a fire to cook rice and have rice to eat, but smoke need not be attended to as it will arise naturally from the fire. (Making a fire to cook rice has the same connotation as sowing grains; rice, the same as grains; and smoke, the same as straws). What these analogies tell us

is that although our capability is limited, if we can truly let go or set aside our own concerns—not just those in this life but also liberation in the future—and focus wholeheartedly and unconditionally on benefiting others, our own welfare will take care of itself.

Actually, the real issue is that we are not able to let go; if we can, things will work out by themselves in due course. There is a very good example to support this. We have been in samsara since beginningless time; whether we were born noble like Indra, the ruler of gods, or inferior like ants or earthworms, we have always worked to safeguard our own interest, never that of others. But how well have we done for ourselves? Not much really, since we are still struggling in the mire of samsara. When we die, we will leave this life empty-handed just like in previous lives, and continue to do the same in future lives. The Buddha, on the other hand, truly let go of everything and focused fully on the benefit of others. As documented in the extensive version of his biography, the Buddha gave his body, even his life, just to feed a hungry being, let alone other sacrifices. He completely ignored his own welfare, yet he attained buddhahood with perfect merit and wisdom. Therefore, being able to let go of selfish concern is like the Buddha; not being able to let go is like sentient beings of the six realms. Regrettably, among Buddhists, there are only a relatively few who can truly grasp the essence of Mahayana. However, this conclusion is just based on readily observable outward appearances and thus may not be accurate.

It is deemed the Theravadin path if the goal of learning the Dharma or doing good deeds is for the sake of one’s own liberation. If the goal is liberation for others, our actions, even those that appear unvirtuous, are meritorious deeds that lead to buddhahood. There are many such stories in the Buddhist sutras. We often participate in activities to liberate animals,

undertake practice, and so on in our own interest. On the surface, we are doing all the right things, but in fact our actions are fundamentally flawed.

Are all actions undertaken for others in accord with the genuine Dharma? Not necessarily. There are indeed many good-hearted people in our society. Every time I hear about their endeavors, I feel ashamed of my own inadequacy. They are not Buddhists, nor do they proclaim their intention to attain buddhahood for the sake of liberating other beings. Yet, we can all see the good that they do. As for us Buddhists, we may try to renew our aspiration everyday by reciting over and over again: “I must arouse bodhicitta in order to deliver others from suffering.” But are we just paying lip service? Do our minds and actions correspond to our aspiration?

In short, only undertaking the altruistic actions that help sentient beings to liberation is deemed the right path for us, the path to enlightenment.

How should we take this path? We need the guidance of good spiritual friends (*kalyanamitra*) to successfully navigate the path to enlightenment. As an example, in our innumerable lifetimes we must have acquired knowledge of the world we live in many times over; just that we cannot remember it. Now even to learn one discipline, we still need the guidance of a teacher to master it. Not taking care of our own interests is something we have never done, thought about, or even dreamed about since beginningless time, whereas minding our own interest is what we have always done in every lifetime. The Buddha asked us to forsake what we are used to and accept what we have never thought about. Just imagine how difficult that can be! Only with the assistance of good spiritual guides can we possibly succeed in this endeavor. Therefore, it is particularly important to choose carefully one’s vajra master and spiritual guide.

## ***How to Choose a Master***

### ***Qualifications for a Mahayana Master***

What are the minimum criteria for a Mahayana master?

First, Mahayana masters must have uncontrived bodhicitta. According to the sutras, if a person has uncontrived bodhicitta, although he or she may not be perfect in every way, we can take this person as our master when no other teacher can be found. We become disciples in the hope of receiving from the master the wisdom and skillful means conducive to our liberation, nothing else. If the master has uncontrived bodhicitta, he or she will at the least instill something good into our minds. In other words, the master will not use us for personal gain, and will try to the extent possible to guide us. So we can learn something.

Second, it is not enough to just have bodhicitta. What can we learn from a teacher of excellent character yet poor knowledge? By the same token, the master may be as kind and loving as the buddhas and bodhisattvas, but lack what we need the most, the wisdom for enlightenment. How can we attain any wisdom if the master has none? So, on the basis of having uncontrived bodhicitta, a Mahayana master must, to a certain extent, be adept in both the sutric and tantric teachings and in particular possess knowledge of the actual practice that we need. A person without bodhicitta and wisdom may be a glib talker and a smooth operator, but is actually more concerned with his or her personal benefit than that of others. Such a person will likely use us for personal gain. Any conflict that arises, if not handled well, can create a lot of problems. In this case, it is best not to follow such a person.

### ***Qualifications for a Vajra Master***

To meet just the minimum criteria is not sufficient to qualify

one as a vajra master. Jigme Lingpa, who received the entirety of Longchenpa's teachings, was an accomplished master of the Nyingma tradition. His work, *Treasury of Enlightened Attributes*, compiled the many qualifications that sutra and tantra require of a vajra master. Later, he wrote in a stanza, "Because it is now the Age of Declining Dharma and sentient beings have barely enough merit accumulated, finding a perfect vajra master like the Buddha or a great bodhisattva is extremely difficult." Thus he said, "Just leave this very high standard for now and see the less stringent requirements a vajra master must fulfill."

§ The master must keep pure the pratimoksha, bodhisattva, and Vajrayana vows.

Pure pratimoksha vows—The vows of pratimoksha can be divided into two types: the lay and the monastic. From this perspective, a vajra master can either be a lay person or a monastic. A lay vajra master must first of all observe the complete lay precepts and not break them.

Pure bodhisattva vows—A vajra master must have generated bodhicitta in aspiration as well as bodhicitta in action. Regarding the bodhisattva vows, I need to point out a problem. Many Buddhists think that when the bodhisattva vows were transmitted in certain rituals they attended, it means they must have received the essence of the vows. Actually, it's hard to say if they have. The question is what holds the key to actually receiving the essence of the vows. If we were to organize a grand ceremony and invite some eminent masters to transmit the bodhisattva vows, would we truly receive the vows? On the outside, the conditions seem to be perfect—the person transmitting the vows is a respectable practitioner who has taken the bodhisattva vows and knows how to transmit the vows; the ritual is accurately performed; we attend the ceremony; and the ceremony is splendid. However, the key to obtaining the essence of the bodhisattva vows lies in engendering the inner

cause, not the outer conditions. The inner cause is whether or not bodhicitta has been aroused from the bottom of our hearts. For instance, after the ceremony, we should ask ourselves if our purpose is for self-benefit or the benefit of others. If it is for the benefit of others, we must have the aspiration to attain buddhahood for the sake of delivering them from suffering. If this is the motivation behind most of our practices, we will receive the essence of the bodhisattva vows. Conversely, if everything is done for our own enlightenment, we do not even have bodhicitta, so how can we hope to receive the true bodhisattva vows? It is absolutely impossible.

Therefore, the first thing is to train the mind, that is, to practice the Four Immeasurables according to the teachings of the inner preliminaries, then generate bodhicitta. The Buddhist teachings have always placed emphasis on undertaking all practices from the mind.

Without bodhicitta or any foundational training of mind, what effect could possibly be expected simply by attending a ceremony bestowing the bodhisattva vows? Although the person transmitting the vows is highly respected, having perfect merit and wisdom, what use are these great qualities to us? He or she cannot forcibly turn us into bodhisattvas if we do not generate bodhicitta ourselves. If it were at all possible, the Buddha would have done so long ago. Therefore, it is not that easy to receive the bodhisattva vows. Once received, the vows must be observed.

Pure Vajrayana vows—To obtain the Vajrayana vows, one must receive genuine empowerment. We may say that we have received empowerment and hence the Vajrayana vows. But whether one has gotten the essence of the vows depends on three factors. First, the person conferring the empowerment must have the qualifications and the ability to do so. In other words, did he or she truly receive the Vajrayana vows? Second,

is the receiver qualified to take empowerment? Third, is the ritual of empowerment properly conducted? If all three are satisfied, we may then say we have been initiated into Vajrayana. Otherwise, it is still questionable if we are indeed disciples of Vajrayana.

§ A vajra master must have extensive knowledge of the Buddhadharmā.

There are some practitioners (like in the past certain old lamas practicing in the mountain caves) who are quite accomplished; they keep their vows pure, are very devout, and have great faith in their lamas. Intellectually, they understand the doctrines to some extent, but have difficulty teaching others since the Dharma is somewhat different from secular knowledge. For instance, even if one is proficient in only one branch of learning, one can already be deemed an authority in that particular field, which is not the case with the Buddhadharmā. One is only able to truly comprehend the intent of the Buddha after having mastered the whole teachings. Just reading a few scriptures is insufficient, as the truth taught by the Buddha may be revealed either fully or partially in various texts. The Buddha always taught according to the capacity of the audience so that the teaching could best benefit them. He would not teach the real truth if it could not be understood. However, if the partial truth could be understood and accepted with joy, and this joy could eventually lead them to the path of enlightenment, the Buddha would first oblige them with rather expedient teachings just to please them. Was the Buddha lying then? No, the Buddha simply gave different teachings to suit the different capacities of his audience. What then is the real thought of the Buddha in all his teachings? It can only be grasped by immersing oneself in the vast amount of scriptures and becoming well versed in them. This is the difference between Buddhist teachings and other disciplines. Thus, one

must be very learned in order to transmit the Dharma to others.

§ A vajra master must have great compassion.

A vajra master should receive sentient beings with compassion. Practitioners who keep their vows pure and are knowledgeable about both sutra and tantra, but are only willing to practice alone in mountain caves and reluctant to have any outside contact, do not meet the requirements of a vajra master, even though they may be real practitioners.

§ A vajra master must be proficient in the *sadhana* of both sutra and tantra.

Especially in Vajrayana, there are many activity-oriented practices undertaken to free sentient beings from suffering and dispel obstacles to practice. But these are all performed according to the *sadhanas*. If one does not know anything about them, one will lack many of the skillful means available for delivering sentient beings. This is why comprehensive knowledge of the *sadhana* is required of a vajra master.

§ A vajra master must have attained certain realization.

Take the example of the Guhyagarbha empowerment. It contains one hundred yidams, of which fifty-eight are wrathful deities and forty-two are peaceful deities. The person bestowing the empowerment must be able to visualize clearly each and every yidam, including the deity's ritual objects, mudra, and adornments. If the person cannot do so, how can empowerment be conferred to anyone? Therefore, a vajra master must have succeeded in attaining realization. Likewise, to teach and transmit Dzogchen, one must have attained Dzogchen realization beforehand. It is like showing someone the way. One must know the way well before one can point out the right direction to others. If the guide is confused, how can others be led correctly? By the same token, if the master has not achieved realization, how can he or she explain the profound Great Perfection? Thus, the person who can transmit teachings



such as the Great Perfection or the pith instructions must be a realized master.

Realization, in this context, does not signify the total eradication of all defilements or the attainment of perfect wisdom, just the ability to more or less eliminate defilements and gain certain wisdom. Here, wisdom denotes not worldly intelligence and discernment, nor knowledge gained from the books, but awareness realized through direct experience.

§ A vajra master must know the four ways of gathering disciples.

These are the means by which the bodhisattvas bring sentient beings to the truth taught by the Buddha. Not knowing these methods would make the task of freeing sentient beings from samsara impossible.

The six points above are the basic requirements of a vajra master. Those fulfilling all six requisites are deemed qualified masters. But there is a saying in Tibet: “It’s hard to distinguish between a thief and a buddha.” Among all the people on the streets, which ones are thieves? We don’t know. The same goes with the buddhas. There must be manifestations of the buddha among those people, but the word “buddha” is not inscribed on any of their foreheads. So we cannot identify a buddha or a thief simply from their appearance. In that case, how should we choose and follow a vajra master? Three ways to observe a vajra master are specified in the tantras of Vajrayana.

First, before approaching the potential master, we can ask people living in the neighborhood since they might know more about this person. This is to observe from a distance. Second, a closer observation can be made by monitoring the behavior of this person nearby, without any contact still. But to do so for only one or two days is not enough because a disguise can easily be put on for a short period of time. Third, we can establish contact with and carefully observe this person for some time,

say six or eight years. If at that point we feel that this person has met the six requirements of a master, we can then become his or her disciple.

People in modern society are constantly occupied with work and what not. How can it be possible for them to spend seven or eight years observing a master? On the other hand, it is a prerequisite that a vajra master have the right qualifications in order to confer genuine empowerment or the pith instructions on Vajrayana practices. What should we do then? In this case, accomplished masters like H. H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok and others would be our best choice because they have been examined over a long period of time and approved by many other distinguished practitioners. So it should not take us too much effort, in terms of evaluating their qualifications, to follow such masters. For masters not in this category though, the checking process is necessary.

These are the minimum criteria in Vajrayana for a master. One cannot be a vajra master if one is unable to meet them. But whether someone can be a vajra master is really not our concern, to become a disciple or not is. As mentioned earlier, regarding the current situation in many places, people tend to receive empowerment from anyone from Tibet wearing a red robe and having a self-proclaimed title of tulku or khenpo, without knowing much about this person’s background or the terms for receiving empowerment. All they know is that empowerment and vajra masters are good for them. It would be all right if they never were to lose their faith in the master after becoming disciples. However, this is usually not the case. For instance, when a master draws a large crowd by giving an empowerment, one week later, people may start making accusations—“We were wrong about him; he has not attained any realization nor kept his vows, and does not even have good character”; or they may argue among themselves by saying, “Your

master is inferior to mine; my lineage is superior to yours; my sect is better than yours"; and so forth. These are some of the problems that lay practitioners have nowadays.

### *Qualifications for a Theravada Master*

Briefly speaking, to be a Theravada master, one must first, keep precepts pure, meaning a sramanera (or sramaneri) should keep his or her respective precepts, and a bhikkhu (or bhikkhuni) his or hers; second, be thoroughly proficient in the knowledge of precepts; third, pay close attention to his or her disciples. There are many other qualifications, but only these three are pointed out here.

Of all the masters, the requirements for a vajra master are the most rigorous, particularly the attainment of realization as it is not easily achievable. Vajrayana absolutely forbids a person to blindly take someone as a master. It strictly requires one to observe a master over and over again before becoming a disciple and subsequently receiving teachings and empowerment from the master.

More importantly, one should never lose faith in the master thereafter, no matter what fault may be found in him or her. Whether the master has merit or not, one should remain faithful and follow the master conscientiously; if not, one may commit negative karma again. Nowadays there are many qualified vajra masters as well as unqualified ones. Hence, we must observe well and choose carefully.

What if we are unable to make this observation? Actually, whether they are monastics or lay people, all are practitioners; the monastics in particular all have some merit—this is for sure. The Buddha also said the monastics who resume secular life and subsequently violate the precepts are like the remains of a musk deer, while the non-practitioners are like a dog's dead

body. From a dead musk deer, a useful substance, musk, can still be harvested, whereas nothing valuable can be salvaged from a dead dog (the view of ancient Indians); it is just a body. In other words, a monastic with however little merit accumulated is still somewhat better off than a lay person under normal circumstances. What lay people should do is to respect, out of one's faith, all the monastics and refrain from counting their faults. If we intend to take a monastic as master, we must repeatedly observe this person beforehand; if not, it is unnecessary to keep watching the person for possible violation of disciplines. Because no one can tell if these monastics have merit or not from their appearance. Some of them may very well be the manifestations of bodhisattvas.

There were once eighty mahasiddhas (great adepts) in India. How did they manifest themselves? If we were to see them today, we would surely adopt an unwholesome attitude toward them. There were hunters, prostitutes, and butchers among them. In short, they were people of the lowest caste, yet they were also the manifestations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Thus, from the perspective of faith, we ought to cultivate the habit of respecting all monastics, as we have nothing to lose. This is the right view that lay practitioners should hold.

## **EMPOWERMENT**

There are some serious problems regarding empowerment nowadays. Everyone wants to receive empowerment because they think empowerment is something extraordinary. Some are told that without empowerment they are not allowed to read the Vajrayana texts. In order to satisfy their curiosity about these texts, they receive empowerment. Others do so because it makes them feel special to have the right to read Vajrayana texts. Not only that, they are often not serious about observing

the Vajrayana vows afterward. This happens in the big cities in China, as well as in other countries and some places in Tibet.

Also, many people think that by attending the empowerment ceremony, listening to the teachings, partaking some food from the tsok offering, and having a buddha statue touch their head, they will thus receive empowerment. In fact, it is not like that at all.

Three conditions must be satisfied if one is to receive empowerment. First, the person conferring the empowerment must be a qualified vajra master. Second, the recipient must have the qualifications to receive empowerment. Third, the way the empowerment is bestowed must be accurate. If one of these three is not fulfilled, we cannot truly receive empowerment. In the future when we plan to receive empowerment, we must check first if these three conditions are fully met.

Now let us discuss what empowerment means. Many lay people and some Chinese monastics as well do not know what empowerment really is. Some believe that receiving empowerment will greatly improve their practice and enable them to swiftly attain accomplishment. Others think that it signifies a permission to read the texts which they would not be allowed otherwise. It must be clarified that to attain buddhahood shortly after receiving empowerment is impossible for most people nowadays. There were some exceptions in the past, but they were people of exceptional faculty. For ordinary people, even to make progress right after receiving empowerment is questionable, much less to attain buddhahood.

Then, what exactly is empowerment? It is a high-level bestowment of precepts. For instance, there are respective *sadhanas* for bestowing bhikkhu, bhikkhuni, and bodhisattva precepts. There is one for empowerment as well. More specifically, to receive empowerment is to take Vajrayana vows. For example, the Guhyagarbha empowerment contains five

root vows and ten branch vows. We should check first if we can observe all of them. If so, we can go ahead and receive the empowerment; if not, we cannot take empowerment, or we may break the vows afterward. All empowerments denote the bestowal of Vajrayana precepts, only the number of precepts varies. Some of the precepts may be rather difficult for ordinary people to observe, but with permission these can be substituted. There are also precepts that regular people are able to observe, but we monastics cannot. Therefore, the proper way to receive empowerment is to know the precepts pertaining to the particular empowerment and whether one can observe them before receiving the empowerment.

When receiving empowerment, if one does not know it is the same as receiving Vajrayana precepts, and the master does not point this out, one could remain ignorant of the precepts for many years. After reading the texts of Vajrayana precepts much later, one will discover either the essence of the precepts was never received or the precepts were violated long ago. The reasons are twofold: first, one did not think clearly in advance about one's suitability to receive empowerment; second, the person bestowing the empowerment neglected to explain the proper steps.

It is stated in the Vinaya that when bestowing bhikkhu (bhikkhuni) precepts, the person transmitting the precepts must first explain clearly what one can and cannot do from then on. The Buddha said that it is surely a great fault to give a butcher a sharp knife to kill, but not as grave a mistake as to transmit precepts to someone without explaining fully what they are.

Some people may question, "Isn't it a good thing to bestow precepts and empowerments? How can there be any fault?"

If the recipient did receive the empowerment, but subsequently violated the tantric vows because he or she was not told specifically what they are, the recipient will end up in vajra

hell. In this case, is the empowerment beneficial or detrimental to the recipient? Of course, the master, not the recipient, should take responsibility. But the fact is the vows have been broken, and even though the recipient is not accountable, he or she is ultimately the victim. Therefore, it must be understood that to bestow empowerment is effectively to bestow Vajrayana precepts. Although one will be permitted to read the Vajrayana texts after receiving empowerment, and can thus gradually and indirectly obtain some wisdom as well as reduce certain negative karma, empowerment is primarily the bestowal of precepts.

Now let us turn to the prerequisites for receiving empowerment.

Only when all six causes and conditions—two causes and four conditions—are present can one actually receive empowerment.

The first is the congruent cause (*samprayuktakabetu*). It refers to the winds (*prana*), channels (*nadis*), essences (*bindu*), and other elements of the human body. A person with all six sense organs intact would basically satisfy this requirement. Therefore, it should not be a concern for most people. The second is the acting cause (*karanabetu*), which refers to the ritual objects to be used for empowerment such as a vase, a statue, sacred nectar, and so forth.

Does a vase with a peacock feather inserted become a ritual object? No. Among the many factors that contribute to the making of a ritual object, the blessing of a vajra master is indispensable. The so-called master's blessing means a person of certain power confers that power on an object. For example, the water that we drink normally is either tap water or mineral water that can only quench our thirst, while blessed water has the power to clear karmic obscuration and increase wisdom. What is the source of this power? Does it come from reciting a sutra? No. If so, all those who have learned how to read should

be similarly empowered. The source of blessing is actually a certain level of realization attained by a practitioner. Only such a person can bless the ritual objects intended for empowerment.

These days, anyone with money can buy nicely adorned gold or silver vases. The fillings for the vase, such as herbal medicine, can also be obtained at the specialized farmers market. But gold is just gold; it should not have any blessing power, right? Similarly, the buddha statues and sacred nectar also need to be consecrated and blessed. The imperceptible power contained within the visible objects comes about through the consecration by and the blessing of vajra masters. A qualified vajra master must have this capability. If we choose one such master, the acting cause would not be an issue.

The first of the four conditions is the direct condition (*hetupratyaya*), which denotes the requirements that all Vajrayana disciples must meet. What are the requirements? One is deemed to have met this condition if one has unshakable faith in Vajrayana, attends the empowerment ceremony, is able to hear the master's words and the reading of the sadhana, and can visualize as instructed at the ceremony. If one does not have much interest in Vajrayana or receives empowerment purely out of curiosity, one can neither meet the direct condition nor receive genuine empowerment. Some who may have certain faith in Vajrayana but are inattentive at the initiation ceremony do not meet the causal condition either.

The second is the predominant condition (*adhipati-pratyaya*), which is what vajra masters must meet. The importance of vajra masters has been discussed earlier. Many people have been to Larung Gar (in Serthar, Sichuan Province) and received teachings there. So this should not be a problem for them. However, in other places lay people, though very devout, are rather ignorant because they do not have the opportunity to hear the teachings and thus lack the necessary understanding of

Vajrayana. As a result, they do not know what a qualified vajra master is and how to choose one, which eventually causes a series of problems.

If a vajra master does not have the ability to bestow empowerment, no one at the ceremony can receive any empowerment. If all it takes is the ability to recite one sutra, anyone can bestow empowerment. But this cannot be farther from the fact. The master must be well versed in the Vajrayana scriptures and has attained certain realization, particularly realization of the generation stage and completion stage, to be qualified to bestow empowerment. Only an empowerment given by such a master is deemed in accordance with the Dharma; all others are just look-alikes. When empowerment is not bestowed properly, the only merit thereof would be to hear the readings of the relevant texts as they are also considered the vajra words of the tantras. But nothing more can come out of it. Like a pot without a ladle, how can anything be taken out of the pot? Therefore, it is very important to observe and choose one's master carefully.

The third is the co-operative condition (*alambana-pratyaya*). In addition to a qualified vajra master, our faith, and the fully blessed ritual objects, there is still one more condition to be met. When bestowing empowerment, the master will ask us to do various visualizations. If we do not comply, we will not be able to satisfy this condition. Therefore, we must listen very carefully to the text being read during the empowerment ceremony and do every visualization as asked. Only then can we receive the empowerment. Quite often, our body is present at the empowerment ritual while our mind is not. If this is the case, there is no chance we can receive real empowerment. Many of you have been to Larung Gar to receive empowerment. There, qualified vajra masters are some of the best you can find anywhere; the ritual objects and sadhana used in the

empowerment ceremony are also impeccably well prepared. Nevertheless, if you are absent-minded and do not follow the instructions of the master while attending the ceremony, the empowerment so received would still be an imperfect one.

The fourth is the immediately antecedent condition (*samanantarapratyaya*), which means the bestowal of empowerment must follow the specified order, that is, the preceding and the subsequent empowerments must not be mixed up. However, this concerns only the vajra master, not us.

In conclusion, when receiving empowerment, our job is first to observe and choose a qualified vajra master, then go to the empowerment ceremony, listen attentively, and follow the master's instructions to visualize accordingly.

As stated clearly in the texts, if any one of the two causes and four conditions is lacking, one will not receive empowerment. An analogy in the text can further elucidate this point. In the old days, a two-wheeled horse-drawn cart would not be able to function at all if one wheel was missing. Likewise, no empowerment can be successfully received if one of the six causes and conditions is missing. Hence, we must strive to fulfill all six requirements in order to receive true empowerment.

An even more important matter that needs urgent attention after the empowerment is to observe the Vajrayana vows. To receive empowerment is to accept the samaya vows. All the vows made at the empowerment ceremony must be followed, or they may be broken, taking the violator down to vajra hell. This would be an extremely dangerous prospect for both the violator and the master, unless the master has attained buddhahood or the high-level realization of a bodhisattva as such a person is no longer affected by causality. Can ordinary people bestow empowerment? Possibly. Those who have reached the advanced level on the path of preparation are qualified to bestow empowerment, but they can also descend into the hell realm

if they break their vows. If it is possible for such vajra masters to be reborn in the hell realm, the followers who receive empowerment from them are just as likely to meet the same fate, if not more so. Therefore, the first thing that needs to be done after receiving empowerment is to understand in full detail the Vajrayana precepts and observe them strictly. This is of vital importance.

Nowadays, the logic behind many decisions is all wrong. For example, if the five precepts for lay practitioners are first explained clearly before everyone is asked to observe the complete set of vows, many people will voice their concern, “I cannot comply; some of the five precepts are not suitable for me.” However, when the subject matter is empowerment, their attitude is different. As soon as they hear of a bestowal of empowerment, they all want to attend. If people have doubts about keeping even the five precepts for lay practitioners, how can they handle the tantric vows? This indicates that people receive empowerment without first evaluating their own suitability of accepting the vows. Actually, the five precepts are not very stringent, nor are the qualifications of the master transmitting these precepts; the requirements of the recipients are also relatively lax. Even so, many people still feel that they are not up to keeping them. Yet, they do not have this feeling when it comes to receiving empowerment. If a Dzogchen empowerment is to be given, all Vajrayana practitioners upon hearing the news will surely attend without any hesitation. But, should they? As discussed earlier, even if the ritual objects, the proceeding of the ceremony, and the master are all perfectly present, it is still possible one may not be in the position to receive empowerment. Dzogchen empowerment entails the observance of many vows. One must consider one’s own ability to keep these vows. If people are so cautious about accepting the five precepts for lay practitioners, they should be much more

serious when considering the acceptance of the Vajrayana vows.

The merit of properly receiving empowerment and observing the Vajrayana vows is much greater than that of the pratimoksha vows, but so is the danger of violating the Vajrayana vows. Nonetheless, as long as one seriously follows the teachings of Vajrayana to abide by the precepts, keeping the Vajrayana vows is not as difficult as it might seem. This is because Vajrayana is not meant for the realized bodhisattvas or buddhas to practice, but for ordinary people like us. From this perspective, we should not be discouraged since the Vajrayana precepts that the Buddha laid down are vows that we can handle. We just need to know the correct way to observe them. To be able to receive empowerment is certainly very auspicious if everything can be done according to the Dharma.

## **Sutra and Tantra: Similarities and Differences**

In Tibetan Buddhism, tantra is a very complete system of thought and practice specifically directed at people of different capacities. However, some practitioners in sutra, lacking an understanding of tantra, think they cannot practice tantra; some practitioners in tantra also cannot accept sutra. Therefore it is necessary to discuss the connection between sutra and tantra and sort out their differences and similarities. This will help everyone understand the contradictions, if any, in sutra and tantra, and prevent serious misconceptions from developing during the course of practicing the preliminaries.

The main topic of discussion is divided into two parts: first, aspects in sutra and tantra that are similar, harmonious, and not contradictory; second, features that are unique to tantra.

### **SIMILARITIES IN SUTRA AND TANTRA**

#### ***The Common Foundation—Renunciation and Bodhicitta***

In our previous teachings on the preliminaries, we emphasized the three stages an ordinary person must undergo on the path from initial practice to final attainment of buddhahood. The first stage is to give up the pursuit of worldly pleasures and cultivate renunciation; the second stage is to give up selfishness

and develop bodhicitta; the third stage is to give up self-attachment and establish the wisdom that realizes no-self. In the first and second stages, there is no difference between sutra and tantra.

Actually, in both sutra and tantra, the outer and inner preliminaries must be practiced; as long as it is Mahayana, renunciation and bodhicitta must be developed. Though there are some differences in terminology, the content of the practice is essentially the same. Whether it is in sutra, tantra, Ch'an, or Pure Land, all require renunciation and bodhicitta; without this foundation, what point is there in reciting the buddha's name? Or in practicing Ch'an? We should recite the buddha's name and meditate on this basis; only then are we truly practicing Pure Land and Ch'an Buddhism.

Nevertheless, the preliminaries are not taught in Ch'an Buddhism, why is that? As most people know, the Ch'an masters from the first patriarch Bodhidharma to the sixth patriarch Hui Neng all attained enlightenment because of their superior faculties. We can tell from Hui Neng's biography that his mental capacity was indeed already quite mature even though he did not read or write. During his refuge with the fifth patriarch, he did not study a lot of sutras, nor spend much time practicing; he was mainly in the rear courtyard doing manual work. Eight months later, when the conditions were right, the fifth patriarch expounded the *Diamond Sutra* to him. When Hui Neng came upon this critical verse—"One should develop a mind which is free from any attachment," he became thoroughly enlightened. He did not undertake the preliminaries, but that is not to say they are not necessary; the purpose of practicing the preliminaries is to cultivate renunciation and bodhicitta, but he possessed these essentials already.

As an example, in the autumn, the flowers and leaves fall off with the slightest breeze; in the spring and summer, they

do not fall off as easily even with strong winds. Similarly, when a person's mental capacity is mature, it takes but a sentence to point out to him the original face of mind. The *Diamond Sutra* that the sixth patriarch heard and the *Diamond Sutra* we recite are exactly the same. Why did he become enlightened after hearing just a verse, but not us? This is because of the difference in our mental capacities. For this reason, we must practice the preliminaries.

From the standpoint of Ch'an practitioners, the Southern school that the sixth patriarch Hui Neng propagated is the most sacred; however, for most people today, the Northern school that the Ch'an master Shenxiu championed is probably more appropriate. Like the preliminaries, the practice is taken in steps until a certain state of realization in Ch'an is attained. Hui Neng did not focus on the groundwork, only on the ultimate state of realization. So, in reality, renunciation and bodhicitta are also necessary even though Ch'an does not talk about it.

In Pure Land, the most important sutra is *The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra*. This is a scripture that is translated into both Chinese and Tibetan from the same Sanskrit edition. The sutra states: "To take rebirth in Western Pure Land, one must stay clear of two kinds of transgression and possess four conditions."

The two kinds of transgression are the five actions of immediate consequence and repudiation of the Dharma. Amitabha Buddha also said all sentient beings in the Saha world with absolute faith in him can be born in Western Pure Land, unless they have committed the five actions of immediate consequence and repudiated the Dharma. All other transgressions like taking life, stealing, etc., even actions that are more serious, can be purified through devotion and recitation of the buddha's name. Only these two transgressions cannot be eradicated, so we must distance ourselves from them.



The four necessary conditions are to visualize Amitabha Buddha and Western Pure Land, accumulate vast merit, develop bodhicitta, and dedicate the aspiration of taking rebirth in Western Pure Land. All sentient beings who possess these conditions and recite the buddha's name with total concentration can be born in Western Pure Land.

Here it is pointed out the practice of reciting the buddha's name without distraction is undertaken with bodhicitta as a foundation. Of course, renunciation must also be present. In *The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra*, it is said: Without renunciation, one will chase after worldly happiness. Desire prevents us from being born in Western Pure Land because it is basically an obstacle. If desire is not eradicated, the thought of taking rebirth in Western Pure Land will not arise; even if it arises, it will not be very strong, so rebirth in Western Pure Land cannot be attained.

Clearly, both Ch'an and Pure Land place emphasis on renunciation and bodhicitta; there is no difference so long as it is Mahayana Buddhism. This is the first point of similarity.

### ***Realization of Emptiness in Sutra and Tantra***

The second point of similarity is the realization of emptiness.

After taking rebirth in Western Pure Land, one must also realize emptiness; without this realization, one cannot experience the true nature of mind, let alone the state of realization in tantra. There are two kinds of situation that occur with rebirth in Western Pure Land. The first kind is typical. In this life, we are ordinary people who practice calling out to Amitabha Buddha; on taking rebirth in Western Pure Land, we encounter Amitabha Buddha who places his hand on our head to bless us; by the power of his aspiration and our own merit, we become enlightened immediately; this realization is at the

first bhumi level. All the bodhisattvas in Western Pure Land are on the first ground and up. Thus, emptiness can also be realized indirectly by reciting the buddha's name; without this realization, buddhahood is not possible. Bodhisattvas in Western Pure Land must continue to practice so that they can attain buddhahood ultimately. The second kind is atypical. Chinese Buddhism espouses the Nine Stages of Lotus Flowers, as does Tibetan Buddhism. If a person does not have strong faith in the Pure Land practice, and has doubt about taking rebirth in Western Pure Land, the person can still be born there if the practice of reciting the buddha's name is really well executed; however, he or she will not encounter Amitabha Buddha for a substantial period of time, and may only be an ordinary person the entire duration. Consequently, a person who takes up the Pure Land practice must have strong faith; if not, he will have to wait a very long time to see the Buddha. But even if the person has to wait, he does not come back but remain in Pure Land where eventually he will still see Amitabha Buddha. Upon seeing the Buddha, he becomes instantly enlightened; he then continues to practice until buddhahood is actualized. Hence, realization of emptiness is also essential in the Pure Land practice, except the emphasis is not on realization in this life but in Western Pure Land. Without realization of emptiness, buddhahood cannot be attained.

Ch'an Buddhism places constant emphasis on knowing the mind and seeing its true nature. What is "nature"? "Nature" is the basic nature of all phenomena. What is the basic nature of all phenomena? All phenomena have just one basic nature—emptiness and clear light. Take as an example a vase, is this multi-colored vase its basic nature? No, it is but an optical illusion produced by our eye consciousness; its basic nature is never separate from emptiness and clear light. To see its true nature is to see this basic nature of mind. Clearly, realization of

emptiness is also essential in Ch'an. Enlightenment in tantra is not different from enlightenment in other schools of Buddhism; ignorance denotes not seeing emptiness; enlightenment denotes a clear experience and apprehension of emptiness. Only when emptiness is realized can buddhahood be possible.

From this perspective, sutra and tantra are the same—both require renunciation, bodhicitta, and realization of emptiness. Actually, all Mahayana schools emphasize these three points.

The similarities in sutra and tantra are briefly explained above; at a more specific level, we can also cite many examples, for instance, the threefold training—precepts, concentration, and wisdom—which sutra and tantra both talk about.

### ***Precepts, Concentration, and Wisdom in Sutra and Tantra***

The precepts in sutra are the same precepts in tantra, but the tantric samaya vows are taken during empowerment. Actually, the tantric precepts include the twenty root precepts for a bodhisattva, and the precepts for a bhikshu and bhikshuni. In the *Kalacakra Tantra*, it is said the monastics are the most qualified to practice tantra; among the monastics, bhikshus are most suited to be vajra masters. One cannot therefore maintain the precepts in tantra run counter to the bhikshu and bhikshuni precepts in the Lesser Vehicle. The *Kalacakra Tantra*, featured prominently in Highest Yoga Tantra, gives this example: If there are two vajra masters in the same place, a lay person and a monastic, which one of them is qualified to conduct consecration and initiation? The answer is the monastic. The lay person is not qualified under this circumstance. The monastic is also deemed best qualified to practice tantra, but that is not to say a lay person cannot practice tantra. From this standpoint, it is clear the precepts in sutra and tantra are not contradictory; otherwise the teachings in the *Kalacakra Tantra* would not

allow the bhikshu to practice tantra, nor would the bhikshu be considered the best qualified to engage in the practice. The 253 precepts that bhikshus have to follow are also highly valued in tantra. The above is an explanation on the precepts.

Concentration is meditative absorption, known also as the four or eight dhyanas. Whether this constitutes the path to liberation depends on how it is practiced; without enlightened realization, it is simply the practice of dhyana. The result is rebirth in the form and formless realms, which are still within the cycle of samsara. However, if one practices dhyana with realization of emptiness as a foundation, it is the path to liberation; moreover, meditative concentration is a necessary step on the path. Whether it is Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana, all place emphasis on practicing the four or eight dhyanas. Hence, there is no difference at all on this point in sutra and tantra.

Wisdom denotes realization of no-self and emptiness. It is essential to all three vehicles.

In sum, precepts, concentration, and wisdom are upheld by all three vehicles of Buddhism. Hence, one can say there is not the slightest difference between sutra and tantra on this point.

Many people are mistaken in thinking the precepts in sutra and tantra are different—because in sutra bodhisattvas are prohibited from consuming alcohol and meat, whereas in tantra they are not.

This is actually not the case. Tibetan Buddhism has never permitted followers to drink alcohol and consume meat at will. The teachings, from the *Kalacakra Tantra* to Dzogchen in the Nyingma tradition, repeatedly caution against treating meat like other food products, and strongly oppose the practice. Not to be denied, a lot of people in Tibet take non-vegetarian food; it is also in Tibet that the practice of tantra is most developed. Why isn't more effort made to keep this practice in check?

We should explain that the practitioners eat meat not because the precepts allow it but because of the environment. In the past, vegetables were not grown on the Tibetan Plateau due to climatic conditions; if vegetables and fruit had to be transported from outside, they would take at least two weeks by which time the food would have spoiled. This was particularly the case in the nomadic region where food was scarce to begin with. Under these circumstances, people generally adopted a non-vegetarian diet, but even then they would not take any meat or non-vegetarian food that, to their knowledge, was killed especially for them. Since both the Mahayana and Vajrayana precepts prohibit taking non-vegetarian food, they had no choice but to observe the Theravada precepts, which allow taking meat by the “triple clean” rule.

Nonetheless, in the past, many ascetics living high up in the mountains persisted in maintaining a vegetarian diet. The Dzogchen master Nyala Pema Dündul, from Nyarong (a county in Sichuan Province today), was a perfect example. He actualized the rainbow body some one hundred fifty-to-sixty years ago; at the time of his death, rainbow clouds filled the sky; no traces of his body were found, not even his hair and nails. This accomplished master vowed to become vegetarian during his retreat in the mountains; it was a pledge he would follow the rest of his life. There are many other such examples.

The requirement in tantra is the same as that expounded in the Mahayana *Lankavatara Sutra*; both oppose taking non-vegetarian food. If there is meat at a tantric feast (tsok), one can only enjoy a piece no bigger than the leg of a fly. From the standpoint of vegetarianism, this hardly constitutes eating meat, nor does it violate the vows in tantra. The same reasoning applies to drinking alcohol. There are many other details in the precepts that are common to sutra and tantra. We shall not elaborate on these here.

The above explains the similarities in sutra and tantra.

## DIFFERENCES IN SUTRA AND TANTRA

### *The Main Difference—Methods of Realizing Emptiness*

Sutra and tantra differ mainly in their methods of realizing emptiness. Although the objective of realizing emptiness is the same, the methods differ greatly.

#### *Methods of Realizing Emptiness in Sutra*

Firstly, let us examine the methods of realizing emptiness in sutra. The basic method in Pure Land for realizing emptiness is the recitation of the buddha’s name; the method in Ch’an is mainly directed at people of superior faculties—thus it appears simple and lacks a systematic approach that takes us from the preliminaries to the actual practice. To an ordinary person, the process by which the sixth patriarch Hui Neng became enlightened is hardly a method; however, to someone of comparable capacity, it is indeed a method that leads to enlightenment. Apart from these, the other method in sutra is logical reasoning.

Let us take a vase as an example. We clearly see the vase, but it is actually not a single entity, but comprised of many particles; these particles can be further divided until there is nothing more to divide—that is emptiness. This is not to say it is transformed into emptiness, but rather it is never separate from emptiness. We cannot perceive this emptiness with our eyes; this method only teaches us a theoretical concept which is based on logical reasoning.

As another example, a piece of fabric when taken apart is a pile of yarn; where then is the fabric? Did it disappear? What am I wearing—fabric or yarn? But a strand of yarn is

also made up of fibers that are twisted together. So is it fabric, yarn, or fiber that I am wearing? If we again break down the fiber into very fine particles and set this aside, where then is the original fabric? Is it just dust particles that I am wearing? In the sutra system, emptiness is understood by way of this kind of reasoning. It is one method of approaching emptiness, but only as a concept, not an actual experience.

How can this understanding be transformed into the wisdom that realizes emptiness? A person must engage in practice that takes a very long time; concurrently, he must accumulate merit throughout this period and purify negative karma. When these conditions are perfected, his understanding will change to wisdom. Apart from Ch'an Buddhism, all traditions in the sutra system employ this method of realization.

But isn't Ch'an Buddhism part of sutra? From my standpoint, Ch'an is both sutra and tantra, but one can also say it is neither sutra nor tantra. It is a method that integrates sutra and tantra—actually it is half sutra, half tantra. Ch'an does not involve either empowerment or visualization, so it is classified as sutra; however, its method of realization is different from sutra in general.

The other schools in sutra rely only on logical reasoning to actualize emptiness. The six treatises by Nagarjuna present a set of arguments to overcome our basic attachment to things; the practice begins after a conceptual understanding is established; it is then a long and slow process that culminates in the actual experience of emptiness. This is the method of realizing emptiness in sutra.

### *Methods of Realizing Emptiness in Tantra*

Tantra is divided into outer tantra and inner tantra. The outer tantra shall not be discussed at this time; the inner tantra

is the highest tantra. There are two methods for realizing emptiness in tantra: one is working with the winds, channels, and essences within the body; the other is Dzogchen.

Non-Buddhist traditions such as Taoism and Qigong also have these practices, but they are similar to tantra in name only, not in meaning. The practice in tantra of working with the winds, channels, and essences within the body can eventually induce realization of emptiness. This method is not mentioned in sutra, because the Buddha gave different teachings in the three turnings to suit people of different capacities.

Practice by way of the winds, channels, and essences is a swift method for realizing emptiness. For instance, if you think for a long time your head is aching, it will definitely start to ache; however, if you are hit on the head with a stick, your head will hurt immediately. Sutra and tantra differ in the same way. It takes a long time to actualize emptiness through logical reasoning, since the concepts are relatively vague. On the other hand, the practice of working with the winds, channels, and essences of the body forces you to come into contact with emptiness. Although the final outcome is the same, it is much faster with tantra because the method is different. This is the customary tantric practice.

Dzogchen does not place emphasis on either working with the vital elements of the body or logical reasoning; these methods are considered to be circuitous. There are aspects of Dzogchen and Ch'an that are similar, but Dzogchen has many practices that Ch'an does not have. Speaking just of realization of emptiness, the two traditions are extremely alike; Dzogchen can also point out the nature of mind directly without relying on other methods. This pointing out by an accomplished master allows the disciple to directly realize Dzogchen wisdom. The wisdom in Dzogchen, the nature of mind in Ch'an, and the realization of emptiness in the Middle Way are actually one and

the same. Tathāgatagarbha is a view held supreme in Chinese Buddhism; it is the natural wisdom expounded in Dzogchen; the word “nature” in knowing the nature of mind refers specifically to the tathāgatagarbha; the state of realization in Dzogchen is also the tathāgatagarbha. Therefore, all are the same when realization is attained. However, Dzogchen can point out the nature of mind without undergoing the complicated process of visualization, only the preliminaries are necessary. As the other practices in tantra usually require a great deal of visualization, Dzogchen is unique in this sense.

### ***The Significance of the “Yab-Yum” Practice***

Some people are very curious about the yab-yum practice in tantra. Sutra does not have a so-called yab-yum practice; if anything, sutra explains the union of merit and wisdom, not the union of a male and female. The yab-yum practice in tantra is a practice involving the winds, channels, and essences of the body. However, to most people, it is not a practice, but a symbolic representation. For instance, the male deity represents clear light, an aspect of phenomena; the female deity represents emptiness; the union of a male and female signifies the inseparability of phenomena and emptiness. The *Heart Sutra* says “form is emptiness”—form can denote all male buddhas or bodhisattvas; it also says “emptiness is form”—emptiness can denote all female buddhas or bodhisattvas. “Form is not separate from emptiness, emptiness is not separate from form” represents the union of male and female. People should understand the yab-yum practice from this standpoint.

### ***Is the “Yub-Yum” Practice Required?***

Is the yab-yum practice required in tantra? Actually, it is not required in Dzogchen, nor is it ever emphasized. People who

lack this understanding think all Vajrayana followers practice the same way, but that is not the case. The practice of working with the winds, channels, and essences of the body constitutes only a small portion of tantra; it is also not undertaken by the average man and woman. Thus, to an ordinary person, it is basically not a method. Dzogchen does not emphasize the yab-yum practice; a Dzogchen practitioner on the path that starts with the preliminaries and culminates in enlightenment is not required to take up this practice; moreover, there are better methods in Dzogchen to realize emptiness. In the future, if you have the opportunity to engage in formal practice and study the Vajrayana texts, it will become even clearer this is the correct view.

Tantra does indeed have some magical practices that have added to its mystery and caused misunderstanding. Some people who are either not willing or unable to follow the precepts have committed wrongdoing under various pretenses, and brought disgrace to Vajrayana Buddhism. Of course, ordinary people are not perfect in conduct, but any misconduct must be imputed to the person, not to Vajrayana Buddhism. For most people, the yab-yum practice is not necessary, nor should it be practiced. Even for someone who is quite accomplished in tantra, it is not that necessary since there are better methods that can be used.

In sum, the common goal in sutra and tantra is to realize emptiness; the difference lies in methodology. Generally speaking, the methods in sutra are not as good as in tantra; the methods in tantra in general are not as good as in Dzogchen. Because of the unique features of Dzogchen, it is considered the highest of all the practices.

### ***Attaining the Vajra Body***

The other aspect unique to tantra, which sutra does not have,

is the attainment of the vajra body. When the vajra body is actualized, it does not appear differently from an ordinary person; however, in reality, it is no longer subject to birth, aging, illness, and death, or affected by the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. Because the body is unobstructed, it can easily fly at will or pass through a wall. Of course, this is not the purpose of attaining the vajra body; the real purpose is to transform the body of an ordinary person into the sambhogakaya that is defined by the thirty-two sacred marks and eighty virtuous signs.

From the standpoint of sutra, this is totally inconceivable; sutra maintains the physical body dwells in samsara, is impure, and should be eradicated or abandoned. To most people, this viewpoint in sutra is not incorrect, but tantra contains a lot of methods developed from wisdom that can transform the impure body into a pure body. As an example, a person who consumes poison may die, but a person who knows the way can combat poison with poison. Before realization, our body is a part of samsara; to be liberated, we must abandon it. However, with wisdom and skillful means, we do not have to give it up; rather we can transform it into the buddha body. The practices in tantra—using winds, channels, and essences and realizing clear light in Dzogchen—are the only way to attain this state. It cannot be accomplished with practices in sutra, be it Pure Land, Ch’an, Mind Only, or Middle Way. Not having read the teachings in tantra, even some of the venerable monastics in the sutra tradition are not able to accept the assertion that the physical body can be transformed in this way. But tantra indeed has methods rooted in the attainment of realization, which is a capacity of the mind. Actually, the development of the impure body is also a function of the mind; it is impure due to negative karma born of an impure mind. When the mind is able to attain realization and experience clear light, the impure body can then

be transformed into the vajra body. Naturally, other practices are also necessary during the process.

This is not merely an exposition; there are many such cases among accomplished masters in the history of Tibet. You must also have heard that, at the actual moment of death of some Dzogchen masters, people witnessed the gradual shrinking of the body until it dissolved into rays of light, and rainbow in the sky.

This transformation of the body is also a function of the mind. Ordinary people do not know how to develop this capability, but practitioners know the key to unlocking such capabilities and can actualize the result for all to see. This is likened to all the high tech gadgets nowadays that people five to six hundred years ago would not have thought possible. Actually, if people had the technology then, they would be able to develop the same things without having to wait several hundred years later for the right conditions to appear. In other words, the technology in the production of these modern gadgets has been around since antiquity; it is only that people in the past did not know how to develop it.

Similarly, we can now open up the inner world of our mind and discover the wonder inside. However, lacking the knowhow, we think afflictions and discursive thoughts are things that must be discarded. Without wisdom at the start, this approach has its merit, but once deep insight is attained, we can transform afflictions into the path without eliminating them. This is where tantra is unique.

In the sutra system, we have to undergo a very slow and long process of countless kalpas to attain initial realization. It then takes as much time to progress from the first bhumi to the seventh bhumi. When the eighth bhumi is realized, the consciousness of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, out of the eight kinds of consciousness, are already purified. At that

point, the external world we perceive is a buddha realm. This is how it is recorded in the sutras.

In the tantric system, one can transform the impure body into the vajra body in one lifetime through the special practice of manipulating the vital elements of the body and Dzogchen. Tibetan Buddhism gives a very detailed explanation of the vital elements of the body and separates them into four levels—outer, inner, secret, and utmost secret; the vital elements that non-Buddhist traditions refer to constitute only the simplest part of the outer level, and are nowhere near the deeper levels. It is by way of these pith teachings that tantra can develop the practice explained above.

Included in Dzogchen is the bardo practice which describes very clearly the entire process of death. I believe many people have either heard of or read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Some people in the West who have had near death experiences are shocked by the description in the book, since their initial death experiences were clearly documented thousands of years ago in Tibet. While the experience of people in the West is limited to the early stage of dying, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* teaches not only the entire process of death but also how to manage it. Actually, we can by way of the bardo practice learn to work with and capitalize on the death process when we are still alive. This practice is unthinkable in the sutra system, nor is it undertaken even in the other Tibetan traditions; it is another reason Dzogchen is distinctive. There are many aspects of Dzogchen that are special, but here we can only cite one to two that are particularly important to highlight the differences between sutra and tantra.

### ***Summation of Differences in Sutra and Tantra***

To sum up, sutra and tantra are different in one, insight; and

two, methods of realizing emptiness.

### ***Difference in Insight***

From the standpoint of emptiness, it is not necessary to employ logic on the tantric path; the clear light nature of mind can be realized here and now. From the standpoint of phenomena, sutra maintains all things perceived by the eye belong to samsara and are tainted; they must be eradicated. This is not knowing the basic nature of phenomena is actually pure and uncontaminated. Only at the eighth bhumi is this truth uncovered. Tantra teaches at the outset even if all phenomena belong to samsara and are tainted, they are in reality the buddha realm.

How do we prove this? The proof is in the actual practice. After the preliminaries are completed, one can engage in the practice directly and, without any assistance, come to his or her own realization that all phenomena are actually the buddha realm. In sutra, it takes a long time to arrive at this state; in tantra, it can be accomplished in this lifetime. This is because sutra lacks knowhow in the methods and comparable insight.

### ***Difference in Methods of Realizing Emptiness***

To realize emptiness in sutra, there is actually only one method, which is logical reasoning; it is less effective in this sense. Although the Pure Land practice is part of sutra, emptiness is realized not in this life but in Western Pure Land; the Ch'an method of realization is different from sutra in general and is mainly directed at people of superior faculties. Tantra, however, has many methods: a person of lesser capacity can practice visualization or work with the winds, channels, and essences of the body; a person of superior capacity can skip these methods and go directly to Dzogchen, a more skillful

practice which can lead to sudden enlightenment. This is a crucial difference which should not be treated lightly, since one must realize emptiness in order to attain liberation.

### ***Sutra and Tantra—Harmonious and Not Contradictory***

There is no contradiction between tantra and sutra, but tantra has more features that are special. The practices in tantra and in sutra, for instance Pure Land combined with tantric practices, can be undertaken at the same time. If one practices Ch’an meditation together with tantra, the methods in tantra will greatly facilitate the process of knowing the mind and seeing its true nature. Tantra is complementary in that it offers methods that Ch’an lacks in preparing one for realization. Practitioners who are accomplished in both sutra and tantra maintain the 84,000 methods that the Buddha taught, from Hinayana to Vajrayana, are not contradictory. People of lesser capacity think the teachings in sutra and tantra abound with contradictions and cannot possibly be practiced together. This arises from not having sufficient insight; otherwise a person can practice all 84,000 methods, also all nine yantras of Dzogchen, in just one sitting. Therefore, over the course of study, one should think the entire Dharma is harmonious and not contradictory, and contemplate from that perspective.

Conversely, from the standpoint of a person who lacks this understanding, the teachings of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, Pure Land and Ch’an, Hinayana and Mahayana, even the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism are all contradictory. This conceptual discrimination is known as denigrating the Dharma. There is a sutra that specifically details the actions that denigrate the Dharma and the ill karma that results from such actions. If these transgressions are committed, one cannot practice tantra and Ch’an, nor take rebirth in Western Pure Land, since

repudiating the Dharma is one of the two transgressions that exclude one from going there. A person who is dedicated to studying one text, paying tribute to one deity, and undertaking one practice has merit; however, he is denigrating the Dharma if he maintains his own practice is superior to others. It is fine to engage in just one practice if undertaking all the practices is not possible, but wrong to criticize other spiritual traditions. If we can generate an open and impartial view from the start, and concentrate fully on one practice, whatever that method may be, we can all attain realization very quickly.

### **CONCLUSION**

Some lay followers are known as “runabout followers.” They are busy all day at the Dharma centers seeking empowerments and blessings; uninterested in attaining the right view or understanding, nothing is learned in the end. If they have actually received all those empowerments, it would mean they also took a good amount of tantric vows at the same time. If the vows are not upheld, they would be violating one precept after another. In the end, the only thing attained is a lot of negative karma.

Naturally, one should have respect for the guru, whether he is a lay person or a monastic. But from the standpoint of one’s practice, is it really necessary to pledge oneself to all the gurus? Actually, it is sufficient to just show respect in our mind. It is also not necessary to meet all the teachers that come from Tibet. The most important thing is to remain steadfast in our position, that is, to cultivate renunciation, bodhicitta, and the view of emptiness. Without this, it is fruitless to rush about from one place to another. Even if a guru does not call attention to the precepts that must be observed after an empowerment, or the followers do not care to know about them, the Vajrayana



precepts must still be upheld. If they are not upheld, a violation is committed whether one knows the precepts or not.

As lay people, we ought to cultivate a pure heart of equanimity toward all monastics—Chinese masters, Tibetan gurus, and yogis alike. In assessing whether or not to accept their transmission and empowerment, we must first observe, then decide. If we decide to accept their transmission, the corresponding requirements must be fulfilled; without this certainty, we should not commit ourselves. Worldly matters are conducted this way, all the more so with the Dharma.

Presently, there are some lay people who never try to establish the right view for themselves or improve their knowledge of the practices; instead, they just join others in seeking gurus who are well known, for instance, siddhas with the ability to fly or discover terma (hidden treasures). Actually, in what way is the discovery of terma useful to us? And what if the guru can fly? Can we fly as well by following him? It is in our own interest to follow a guru who can give us the tools to attain liberation. However, this is not something that can be acquired arbitrarily from just anyone; prior to and after obtaining such knowledge, there are requirements we need to fulfill. This must be taken seriously.

## Sutra and Tantra: Similarities and Differences

—*based on the view of Rongzom Pandita*

As the title indicates, this discussion is based on the view of Rongzom Pandita, the great scholar of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. Although the points for discussion are not many, they are all very key points.

Our discussion here is not a practice but common knowledge that practitioners must know. It is my view that not every practitioner needs to learn the Five Great Treatises or all the tantras because some parts of this massive body of works are not that useful for actual practice; they only serve as additional knowledge. But as a practitioner, one should at least have the knowledge pertinent to one's own practice.

Actually, with respect to the ground, path and fruition, or the view, practice and conduct, sutrayana and tantrayana differ in all three aspects except the ultimate fruition of buddhahood. Although some great masters in both India and Tibet hold the view that buddhahood achieved through the sutra path is just part of the state of the bodhisattvas at the tenth bhumi, not the true state of buddhahood, it is merely an expedient explanation. In fact, the fruition of sutra and tantra in Buddhism is exactly the same; only the way of attaining it is different.

## SIMILARITIES

Regarding ultimate truth or emptiness, the view of the two systems is not much different. That is to say, the view expounded in the two exoteric treatises, Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* and Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way*, on the subject of all phenomena being emptiness, detached from all fabricated constructs and so on, is the same as the tantric view on emptiness.

Here, fabricated constructs denote sentient beings' attachment, that is, all discriminating notions of good and bad, long and short, high and low, etc.

From the standpoint of relative truth, the idea upheld by both systems of all phenomena being illusory is basically the same as well. On the other hand, it is pointed out in Rongzom Pandita's *The Parable of a Black Snake* that absolute realization of all phenomena being illusory like dreams is attainable only through Dzogchen.

The tantric view of relative truth is closer to the view of the Yogācāra (Consciousness-Only) school. Yogācāra holds that all external conditions are created by the mind; besides the mind, there is no matter. This is also the view of the tantric system. Of course, this view is not the same as that of idealism which also suggests there is no matter other than mind or consciousness. Both Yogācāra and tantric Buddhism acknowledge the existence of matter, but it is created from sentient beings' consciousness, not by God. There is tremendous energy stored in this consciousness, which in Buddhist jargon is habitual tendency. When this energy is released, all phenomena such as the external world and sentient beings manifest. Therefore, the origin of all external phenomena is our minds.

As I mentioned earlier, there is no difference between buddhahood attained through sutrayana and tantrayana.

All the above is discussed from the standpoint of the view.

From the standpoint of practice, both systems emphasize the practices of renunciation and bodhicitta as well as all other preliminary practices.

## DIFFERENCES

### *Relative Truth and Ultimate Truth are Inseparable*

Ordinarily, sutra distinguishes clearly between relative truth and ultimate truth. Its discourse maintains the illusory world of mountains, rivers, earth, and so on that we see is relative truth, while the void nature of all these phenomena is ultimate truth. The inherent nature of matter is emptiness; besides this, the physical world is all just an illusion. Ultimate truth is real while relative truth is false. Because of this glaring difference between the two, only ultimate truth is present at the time of attaining buddhahood. Ultimate truth is the state of buddhahood.

Tantra holds that relative truth and ultimate truth are inseparable—relative truth is ultimate truth and vice versa. Relative truth in tantra denotes the external and internal phenomena that we perceive; ultimate truth is luminosity of tathāgatagarbha.

There are two kinds of phenomena—one is the physical world we see such as the earth, mountains, rivers, sun, moon and stars; the other is the mandala of the buddha, like Amitabha's pure land of Sukhāvātī, Akshobhya's pure land of Abhirati, and so on. Of the two kinds of phenomena, that which is perceived by sentient beings is an illusion—it is completely different from ultimate truth; that which is pure is the same as emptiness. Emptiness is never separate from pure phenomena, and pure phenomena never separate from emptiness. Buddhahood is not attained in mere nothingness but amid pure phenomena. This is

known as the inseparability of relative truth and ultimate truth.

### *All Phenomena are the Mandala of the Buddha*

Sutra deems all these illusions we see now are essentially impure phenomena. The tantric view, however, is that phenomena in and of themselves are in fact pure; they represent the mandala of the buddha.

Even though the sutra system acquiesces to this view, it does not emphasize this too much. Sutra maintains that when bodhisattvas attain the eighth bhumi, everything appears pure in their eyes. However, things have not always been pure; they were not pure originally, but were transformed into pure phenomena through practice.

Tantra says pure phenomena seen by bodhisattvas of the eighth bhumi are not the result of transforming the impure into the pure; they are intrinsically pure. It is only because we have afflictive and cognitive hindrances as well as ignorance that we cannot perceive the pure mandala of the buddha, but the mandala has always been there and is eternally pure. Upon reaching the eighth bhumi, as our ignorance is almost cleared, we can begin to touch the true reality of the world. Before this stage, all that we see and feel are false perceptions.

Vajrayana practice is not like a magician who by using certain techniques can turn something into nothing or nothing into something, nor is it a transformation of the external object itself.

The same is with affliction. The sutra system and especially the Yogācāra scriptures all recognize the eight consciousnesses. On attaining the eighth bhumi, all but the alaya consciousness are already transformed. Basically, through Dharma practice, past impure afflictions are transformed into pure phenomena—the transcendent wisdom of the buddha.

Tantra says there is no doubt our consciousness can change into pure wisdom through practice. In fact, when we have affliction and ignorance, affliction in itself is already pure, already the sublime wisdom, the tathāgatagarbha. Yet we cannot feel or perceive this at the time because of the presence of affliction and ignorance, and because our practice still falls short.

An analogy can better explain this point. A person with gallbladder disease may see all white things such as paper or a white wall as yellow. If everyone has the same sickness, the wall will appear yellow to all, not white. Of course, the wall is not yellow; the problem is with everyone's eyes. When their conditions slowly improve after treatment, they will gradually see that the wall is actually white and that there is no yellow color anywhere on the wall.

Likewise, the sutra system fails to realize all changes come from within the practitioner himself, not from outside. As with the analogy, one thinks the wall changed in color—from yellow originally to white later on. The tantric view is that change happens not on the outside, as external things are intrinsically pure already. As the analogy indicates, what changed is our eyes.

We can see very clearly from this analogy that the view of the sutra system is not quite at the ultimate level. The proof sutra offers is just that we can make afflictions disappear with practice. This argument in support of the view that things are not inherently pure but only become pure later on is not very convincing. By comparison, the tantric view that all phenomena are intrinsically pure can be very convincing indeed.

In fact, some sutras, although very few in number, also mention that Sakyamuni Buddha said our world itself is already pure, just that we don't see it. But the more important problem is that there is no mention at all of how to practice in order to perceive all manifestations as pure in any text of the sutra

system; the only teaching offered is the practice of bodhicitta and emptiness. Pure phenomena naturally manifest when we undergo a very long and arduous training and reach the eighth bhumi.

The same situation can be found in many areas within Buddhism. For example, the paramitas of patience and generosity, bodhicitta, and some uncommon states of buddhahood in the Mahayana practice are also mentioned in the Theravada texts, but they are told as stories, like how Sakyamuni Buddha cultivated bodhicitta and practiced the six paramitas before attaining buddhahood, rather than as sets of specific practice. Similarly, in the sutra system, the texts also describe the nature of the world being inherently pure, but offer no specific practice either. Although pure phenomena manifest when bodhisattvas reach the eighth bhumi, it is not achieved by undertaking certain practices that aim to transform the impure into the pure. Rather, it is when ignorance is reduced by practicing bodhicitta and emptiness that pure phenomena can manifest naturally afterwards.

The fact is bodhisattvas of the eighth bhumi could not have taken up the practice of pure perception in the first place, because there is none offered in the writings of the sutra system. They come upon this result inadvertently.

Vajrayana, on the other hand, is different. We know from the tantric texts that all is primordially pure. The better skilled tantric practitioners may still have sense perceptions of defiled phenomena at the beginning, but they harbor no notion of anything impure in their minds because they know all is intrinsically pure.

The generation stage of Vajrayana is a specific practice for the training of pure perception. Via the generation stage, even ordinary beings don't have to wait too long to achieve accomplishment. Upon reaching the highest state, one sees

everything around as nothing but manifestations of the buddha; nothing is defiled. This is where even ordinary beings who have not attained the first bhumi of the bodhisattva path can successfully reach. So, in terms of purification of phenomena, tantra has swift methods of its own.

People of superior capacity who have faith and maintain discipline with their practice may reach a more advanced state in their practice as early as in six months if they focus their efforts solely on practicing the generation stage. Moreover, there are many practices to choose from within the generation stage, all of which can lead to the same final result. Of course, this is based on the premise that the preliminaries are completed satisfactorily; if not, there can never be any result, let alone in six months.

How does one know one's own capacity? From the standpoint of Vajrayana, the strength of one's faith in the Dharma is the yardstick. For instance, a person with superior faith in Dzogchen has superior capacity for Dzogchen practice; a person with medium faith in Dzogchen has medium capacity; a person with no faith in Dzogchen has no capacity.

Although Sakyamuni Buddha himself did not distinguish between superior or inferior disciples, we must recognize people have different capacities. That is why the Buddha offered different practices and different views to people of different capacities.

Relatively speaking, the generation stage is already a great practice, but it is still an indirect path. We know that one cannot enter directly into the enlightened realm of the buddha by way of the generation stage alone; instead, one must first practice visualization with thangkas which, however, are painted by people and hence not quite the ultimate way. Whereas Dzogchen, by skipping these diversions and keeping only the essential point, enables the practitioners to attain the enlightened

pure state directly and much faster through the practice of tōgal. This is a very important point to note. However, tantric practitioners who do not have the capacity to practice Dzogchen must take the indirect path before reaching the final goal.

There are two kinds of attachment that are most stubborn in each person's mind: one is the view that the outer world, this Saha world, is impure and filled with suffering—due to afflictions, birth, aging, sickness, death, etc.; the other is the view that everything in the world truly exists.

The sutra system through its teaching of the Middle Way eradicates the notion of the actual existence of a self of person and of phenomena, and attachment to the self of person and self of phenomena, but it has no solution for eliminating attachment to the impure perception of the world. Sutra is of the view that even highly realized bodhisattvas of the first bhumi would still perceive all phenomena as impure but illusory at the same time in the post meditation state.

Tantra, on the other hand, can eliminate both attachments. As sutra has already explained the view of emptiness very clearly, tantra emphasizes more on the part that sutra has difficulty with, that is, all phenomena are the pure realm of the buddha, and hence on the practices of the generation stage. This is a very important difference between the two.

Naturally, if one's faith in or understanding of Vajrayana is inadequate, it is perfectly fine not to practice Vajrayana, so long as one is not biased against any particular school or tradition of Buddhism. The Buddha did not say everyone should learn Vajrayana; whether it is the Great Vehicle, the Lesser Vehicle, sutra or tantra, all are the paths pointed out by the Buddha for sentient beings. Different beings cannot all take the same path. However, if one has strong faith in Vajrayana, it is best to choose this path to enlightenment since its methods lead to accomplishment most swiftly.

### ***Practice of Emptiness***

The very basic practice of the sutra system is the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness, which is usually what followers of the exoteric system begin with. The four foundations of mindfulness basically refer to the practices of impermanence, contaminated phenomena, no-self, etc. in *The Four Seals of Dharma*.

In the sutra system, there is only one way to practice emptiness. First, follow the methods provided in *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* and *Introduction to the Middle Way* to contemplate and thus comprehend the nature of all phenomena is emptiness. Secondly, having felt profoundly the void nature of things, continue to practice and prolong this feeling over time. Realization can be attained this way, but at very slow pace.

Comparatively, tantric Buddhism provides many kinds of practice. It can be said that the essence of all the inner tantras from India has been completely transmitted to Tibet and incorporated into the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The schools were formed not because of strife or dissension; rather, each school has its own strengths and specialty that complement one another.

The two methods for realization of emptiness that Vajrayana recommends most highly are the completion stage with marks and the completion stage without marks.

The completion stage with marks refers to practices on the channels, winds and essences of the subtle body. This is a very effective practice, but the expected result will be produced only if the preliminaries are practiced satisfactorily.

I can explain briefly its principle. For example, when we meditate, we all wish to stay calm with no discursive thoughts in mind, but find it difficult to do. It is because the winds or inner air of the subtle body is closely related to the mind. If we

set about working with the mind, we can control the channels, winds and essences of the body; conversely, if we start with the channels, winds and essences, we can keep the mind under control. Here, the inner air or wind is not our breath but subtle energy circling in the channels and chakras.

According to tantra, the chakras are located at the chest, throat and other areas in the body. These chakras and winds usually cannot be detected either by eyes or instruments, but they do exist. When we have these winds under control, all discursive thoughts lose their power instantly. Because we are unable to control the movement of the winds at present, our thoughts run wild.

Through this practice of the channels, winds, and essences to purify all discursive thoughts, the nature of mind will manifest; but, in addition, there must be pith instructions from the vajra master as well. Absent the master's pith instructions, true awareness even if it dawns will not mean anything. The fact is the nature of mind always reveals itself every time we die, but we never recognize it; we can also encounter the nature of mind momentarily when we go into deep sleep every night, but we fail to realize it. It is for this reason that the vajra master's pith instructions are needed at the critical juncture. Once we apply the instructions, realization comes swiftly. This is the fast track to realization of emptiness in tantra.

The path of sutra does not offer such method. Because the capacity of the practitioners of sutra is not as mature, the Buddha only introduced less complex practices to them. In the eyes of these practitioners, the tantric practices always look mysterious.

The Five Great Treatises which we study at length do not expound or teach this method. Among the five, only *The Ornament of Clear Realization* touches upon the actual Mahayana practice. But even so, such profound method is not found

anywhere in the text, because *The Ornament of Clear Realization* is based on the scriptures of the sutra system. As no such method is provided in these scriptures, it is no wonder the path of sutra takes longer to gain accomplishment.

Basically, the practices of generation stage and completion stage cover all the Vajrayana practices. The generation stage serves to abolish our impure perception, while the completion stage eradicates our attachment to the self-existence of phenomena. Both methods yield results fast.

Even in Tibet today, we often hear about the remarkable signs shown by a certain master when he died, such as shrinking of the body and other phenomena, as mentioned in Vajrayana and Dzogchen. Just like when Sakyamuni Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma in India, one would hear news of someone attaining the state of arhathood or that of bodhisattva at the first bhumi almost on a daily basis. These phenomena all testify to why tantric practice is unique and unexcelled.

However, those having no faith in the tantric path will not gain any result by practicing Vajrayana; it could even be problematic. In this case, they can only take up the practices in sutra. To use an analogy, flying is the fastest way to get to places, but if you can't afford the air ticket, you can only take the train.

In the Tibetan Buddhist canon, *Kangyur* comprises the words said by the Buddha himself, of which seventy percent relate to sutrayana texts and only thirty percent to tantric texts. Practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism usually study the sutrayana texts first, then move on to learn the tantras.

The Chinese Buddhist canon has only sutrayana texts, nothing on Vajrayana. From the *Chinese Manuscripts in the Tripitaka Sinica*, we can see that there are many sutras and treatises translated from India, but rarely are they subsumed into a comprehensive system of practice. Although Nagarjuna, Asanga and other great scholars also organized some practices

this way, there are not many around.

Whereas in Tibetan Buddhism many realized masters in the past dedicated their lives to the research and actual practice of the teachings of both sutra and tantra, extracting the essence of the teachings and compiling them into a complete system that covers everything from the preliminary practices to the main practices. The four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism all have their own unique practices.

The different traditions of Buddhism, whether it is Tibetan or Chinese, sutra or tantra, are all good. Separately, each is the right path for the person of suitable capacity. But from an overall perspective, there is still a distinction in the level of profundity.

Tantra not only offers many actual practices that are quick and effective, but also has broad and condensed versions, some of which are really very simple. Being simple does not mean the contents are incomplete; it means the practice is easy to do. To attain the desired result with a simple method is the skillful way of tantrayana.

I have said before that tantra is particularly suitable for people in this era because people today prefer the fast food culture. What I mean is we don't have time to read the massive volumes of scriptures but are more receptive to simple practices. I gave a teaching on several meditation practices, one of which is a very simple method that can achieve the same result as well. If the result is the same, it is of course the simpler the method the better. Many people may not benefit from practices that are complicated.

### ***Affliction is Bodhi***

Despite the fact that some of the more profound sutrayana scriptures mention that affliction is bodhi, karma is bodhi,

mind is bodhi, etc., the sutra system has never given a very clear explanation of why affliction is bodhi. Only tantra can explain this well. However, even within tantra, there are many levels of understanding. In the outer tantras, the explanation is rather vague. And not just the outer tantras, some given in the inner tantras are not quite the ultimate view either; depending on how it is explained, there is still a difference in terms of the clarity of the answer within the inner tantras. Only Dzogchen gives the most direct answer.

This does not mean the Buddha did not know these profound principles when expounding the teachings of sutra. It is only because sentient beings' capacity was not developed enough that the Buddha used the least complicated method to describe concepts such as no-self and other basic doctrines in the sutrayana texts.

The two viewpoints, affliction is bodhi and external objects are the mandala of the divine, actually mean the same. It is because we make a distinction between our internal mental phenomena and the external physical world that the Buddha taught them separately. When all our attachment have been abolished, the internal and external phenomena will merge into one; the two viewpoints will become one as well.

Affliction is bodhi means affliction is the wisdom of the buddha. Does it mean when we have affliction, we have the wisdom of the buddha? Then why don't we feel the arising of this supreme wisdom when anger comes? This is the part that people find most difficult to understand.

It is why tantra is kept away from the general public. There is really nothing in tantra that cannot be told but for the fact that the tantric view can easily cause two kinds of misunderstanding: first, some people will reject the tantric view purely based on their impressions and thus commit the transgression of defaming the Dharma; second, another group will go to the

other extreme—thinking there is no need to eradicate affliction since affliction is bodhi, they will behave badly at will, abandon their vows, give up mantra recitation, practice, and so forth.

If there is no genuine guidance, just simply claiming affliction is bodhi or all phenomena are the buddhfield, many people will get the wrong idea and possibly commit wrong actions as well. After all, not that many people are receptive to such profound insight. Therefore, it is better to keep the tantric view private, only revealing the notion such as affliction is bodhi to people whose capacity is readily developed. The Buddha also took this into consideration and required that tantra not be taught openly. Nevertheless, it is only a relative, not absolute, secret. If everything were to be kept as absolute secret, tantra would lose its reason to exist; what good is it if no one is allowed to know it?

Nowadays, tantric texts and statues are sold on a large scale in the open market; it is no longer possible to keep tantra secret. But I take comfort in knowing that no one really knows the meaning of the texts, even if the writings are public now, just some superficial understanding at best.

And it is not just with tantra; from a certain standpoint, sutra is the same. For example, many people do not understand the concept of emptiness which is central to sutrayana. The inability to understand it causes rejection of the doctrine and negative karma to be committed as a result of the rejection. So, for the sake of sentient beings, the view of emptiness should not be propagated too casually either. To properly teach emptiness, one should not just simply say that “the nature of all phenomena is emptiness” but explain clearly instead why it is emptiness, how to practice emptiness, and so on.

What are the things that need not be kept secret? Ideas such as past life, future life, cyclic existence, and karma are pretty straight forward. They are subjects generally suitable for a public

audience.

When a profound theory is first introduced, it usually becomes the target of mass rejection. People cannot accept it right away because they lack the wisdom for ideas that are ahead of their time; they need time to adapt to unfamiliar situations.

The same goes for other things around us. When we see a still object, we cannot just say to others, without any explanation, “It is not still. It is moving. Being still is moving.” If we put it this way, no one can accept it. How can something static be moving at the same time? Contradictions can never coexist. But if we explain further, “I don’t mean the object appears to be moving. What I mean is that it looks still, but if we examine it under a microscope, it is actually not still but moving constantly.” No one will object to this explanation; instead, they will follow our way of thinking and come to understand the meaning of “being still is moving; moving is being still.”

Tantric Buddhism was propagated in Tibet the same way. When Padmasambhava went to Tibet, he transmitted Dzogchen to only a handful of people. After Vimalamitra and other masters went to Tibet later on, Dzogchen teachings were given to more people. As Tibetans gradually gained greater understanding of tantric teachings and adapted to its framework, only then was Dzogchen basically open to the public. However, the lineage of the inner tantras was never established in Han Chinese region. As a result, it has been rather difficult to obtain support of esoteric teachings from Buddhist masters in China. Although Ch’an practice is similar in part to tantric practice, owing to the lack of comprehensive knowledge of tantra on the part of individual Dharma teachers of the sutra system, misunderstanding is unavoidable.

Both sutra and tantra expound the ideas of emptiness, clear light, and tathāgatagarbha. But what exactly is clear light



or tathāgatagarbha? Sutra offers no clear answers. Tantra, on the other hand, gives not only clear-cut explanations but also corresponding practices.

### ***All Phenomena are naturally the Buddha***

This point of dissimilarity between sutra and tantra integrates the second point and the fourth point discussed above. Here, all phenomena include the external environment as well as sentient beings' consciousness; the buddha denotes luminosity of tathāgatagarbha.

The fourth point, affliction is bodhi, basically covers all the viewpoints of tantra.

Every word in tantra can be explained on many different levels. All tantric practitioners have the requisite capacity for the tantric path, but the ripening of that capacity can vary and so the inner meaning of the same word is revealed differently to people of varied capacity.

A sentence such as “all phenomena are the mandala of the buddha” has at least four different levels of explanation. From the lowest to the highest level, the explanations are all correct but they express progressively deeper meaning due to sentient beings' different capacity. The mandala that is most superficial, lowest in representation, and least definitive in meaning is one that is depicted in a thangka showing the palaces of the Five Buddhas filled with all the deities; while the ultimate mandala is clear light and tathāgatagarbha.

The reason is that ancient India was a complex place with many schools of thought and belief; people were quite open, active, and free spirited at that time. Thousands of Brahmins once pretended to give up their own faith and converted to Buddhism, but their real intention was to destroy Buddhism by mixing the Brahmin view with Buddhist theories. This went on

secretly for many centuries. However, there were ways to handle this problem. The Buddha knew this would happen long ago, so he withheld the true meaning of many Buddhist terms from them. Many tantric contents were kept secret, including the astronomical calculation in the *Kalacakra Tantra*, especially some of the tantric terminologies. Even though non-Buddhists also use exactly the same terms, the real meanings are completely different between the two groups. This is why tantra strongly emphasizes the importance of lineage. Oral transmission from the vajra master is absolutely necessary for realization to be attained in tantra, because without it, one cannot even understand fully the theoretical part of the teaching.

On the other hand, the viewpoints of sutrayana such as impermanence, suffering, no-self, etc. are relatively straightforward. For example, the opposite of impermanence is permanence. No Buddhist would acknowledge phenomena are permanent, so there is no way it can be mixed up with other views. If other views were incorporated, it would be pretty obvious.

“All phenomena are the realm of the buddha” means the world we are seeing now is not its original face but one produced by ignorance and defilement, just as materialism holds that mental aspects and consciousness are products of the brain.

As mentioned earlier, when a person has gallbladder disease, a white object looks yellow. If someone is born with this disease, he or she will naturally believe all white things are yellow and not for a second think there is a problem on his or her part. When later on the disease is treated, the person will gradually see things turn from yellow to white but think the change is taking place externally rather than from within.

By the same token, we were born with defilement and ignorance, so the world we see is a kind of distorted illusion. Subsequently, through the help of Dharma practice, we slowly

come to realize all phenomena are indeed the realm of the buddha.

It is clearly stated in chapter six of *Beacon of Certainty*, as well as the view held by Tibetan tantra, that all phenomena are the mandala of the buddha. When actually deducing this point, the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism takes some unique approaches which are not only conceptually simple but also very persuasive. In addition, Rongzom Pandita always stressed that every sentient being sees a different world; it does not mean the reality of the world is different, only the experience or appearance of it is different.

Subjective idealism is right about this point. George Berkeley maintained existence is that which is perceived; nothing exists other than human cognition. But he was wrong in his subsequent reasoning. Despite this, materialism cannot overturn the theory of subjective idealism. The French philosopher Denis Diderot (1713-1784) once commented in a letter about subjective idealism, “This system, to the shame of mind, to the shame of philosophy, is the hardest of all to refute, though it is the most absurd.”

Actually, it is precisely because our accepted knowledge already runs counter to the true reality of all things that failure to refute Berkeley’s view is really not the shame of human mind but rather a demonstration of human wisdom, for the nature of the world is just as Berkeley put forward.

The Buddhist view is that if a being from each of the six realms, a bodhisattva of the eighth bhumi, and a buddha, representing eight different states of mind, all go to the same place and look at the same glass of water, each will see a different phenomenon: a being from the hell realm sees the water as boiling liquid copper, liquid iron and the like; a hungry ghost sees blood, pus, etc. in place of water; an animal sees it as an abode; a human just sees the water; and nectar is what’s in

the eyes of a celestial being; a bodhisattva of the eighth bhumi sees two types of phenomena—one like the nectar seen by the heavenly being, the other as the consorts of the Five Dhyani Buddhas; lastly, in the state of the buddha, there is neither color nor shape of anything to be seen; what the buddha sees is dharmakaya, clear light, the tathāgatagarbha. These eight phenomena cannot all be accurate and true; there can only be one truth and that is the realm of the buddha—the ultimate, the absolute truth of all. Why is that?

The reason is because the other phenomena are all products of ignorance, and the products vary depending on the extent of ignorance. Although these phenomena get increasingly close to the truth, none of the representatives except the buddha can see true reality.

To better understand this, you should read chapter six of *Beacon of Certainty*, and *Essence of Clear Light*, a commentary on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* by Ju Mipham Rinpoche

Simply put, what we see now is not the state of the buddha nor the absolute reality of matter, only its relative reality. Even if our vision is very good, without any obstruction, what we can see is only the gross aspects of things. In this sense, it can also be said that our conclusion about the world around us is accurate, but we cannot see anything beyond this, such as the atom, electron, nucleon, etc. All these therefore are just relative reality, while absolute reality only the buddha knows.

From this we can infer at the end all that we see is not mind nor matter, but tathāgatagarbha. The view of the highest state of sutrayana holds that the external world is not real, but it exists despite being impermanent and illusory; whereas the view of tantra is that when our ignorance is eliminated, the external world will change as a result. As this is the innate power of the mind, we don’t need to do anything about the external world; it will just become increasingly pure by itself and eventually

manifest as the mandala of the buddha.

We all know that a buddha has three levels of manifestation—dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya. Many wrathful and peaceful deities in Vajrayana, such as the Five Dhyani Buddhas, are basically the sambhogakaya. This kind of buddha can provisionally be the central deity in the mandala we are referring to; however, this is only the state of an eighth-bhumi bodhisattva, not that of a buddha.

The most genuine, absolute buddha is the dharmakaya, the tathāgatagarbha. It is stated in the *Diamond Sutra* and many other sutrayana texts that any buddha image showing colors and shapes along with the head and hands is not the most definitive meaning of the buddha. Sutra also has scriptures that expound the teaching of tathāgatagarbha. Mipham Rinpoche and many other Buddhist masters classified these scriptures as “half sutra half tantra” since they elucidate a view that falls somewhere between the two systems.

From the comparisons presented so far, we can conclude that although sutra can be used to great effect, the solutions that can really help us at the end must still come from tantra. During the time of Sakyamuni Buddha, people were relatively simple, leading a slower-paced lifestyle and with moderate afflictions. Whereas people today are very complicated, very busy and burdened with gross defilement. That is why Sakyamuni Buddha at the time chose to expound teachings of the sutra system first. He knew that people’s defilement would become more serious later on and that the teachings in sutra alone would not be enough to help. He believed tantric teachings should be widely propagated to benefit people in modern times. Now 2500 years later, we find the current situation is exactly so.

Among the schools in Chinese Buddhism, I am more familiar with Pure Land and Ch’an, which are two very good schools. As I know very little about the rest, I will not make any

passing comment.

Presently, in the practices of sutra, I think the Pure Land practice is more promising. If one does not have a particularly sharp faculty nor the time to take up a whole series of practice, it is best to choose the Pure Land school, the reason being that its practice is practical, not likely to sidetrack its practitioners, and requires no realization. One only needs to have unflinching faith in Amitabha and to chant Amitabha’s name and mantra. I think the Amitabha practice is the best hope for those who really have no other way to practice. Pure Land practice is also available in tantra; it is basically no different from that in sutra except for the addition of Amitabha empowerment and visualization.

Personally, I think Ch’an Buddhism is very good, but only suitable for those of more superior faculties. In view of the times we are in today, it is difficult to say what can be achieved with Ch’an Buddhism or if the Ch’an masters themselves have attained genuine realization. I always question the result of Ch’an practice when the foundation of outer and inner preliminaries is lacking. Historically, there were many extraordinary Ch’an masters; records of many sublime, realized Ch’an masters in China are also found in the Tibetan edition of the history of Chinese Buddhism that was translated a few hundred years ago. But nowadays whether there are still Ch’an teachers of such caliber is really a good question. Therefore, in my opinion, if one is unable to handle other practices, one should take up the Pure Land practice as it is faster and more practical.

In various texts from the Prajnaparamita sutras to Dzogchen, there are more than ten different terms expressing the meaning of tathāgatagarbha. Why are so many terms used to describe tathāgatagarbha? From the standpoint of relative truth, there is no way to show tathāgatagarbha to other people as it is

not a real entity. Many people who turned to Buddhism came from different backgrounds and often with different faiths; if all of a sudden a term was used that conveyed a view very different from what they originally held, they would reject it right off. As the most important principle of teaching the Dharma is to teach according to sentient beings' respective capacity, the Buddha took care to ensure that his audience would gladly embrace Buddhism by adopting different terms to suit different audience's level of understanding.

Confucianism upholds the basic goodness of human beings, while some Western religions maintain mankind is here to atone for its original sin. But I think neither Eastern nor Western philosophy can elucidate the very essence of matter, or what the true face of the world is. Buddhism holds that goodness and evil are only a product of the basic nature—an external phenomenon, nothing real. The other philosophical systems are not as profound as the wisdom of tathāgatagarbha; in fact, they are way behind.

Tathāgatagarbha is the most essential and ultimate face of mind; it is also the original face presented in Ch'an Buddhism. There can be no second face besides this. Realization of tathāgatagarbha comes in many different levels. It is very difficult to ascertain if one has actually been in touch with tathāgatagarbha upon realization. What is certain is the final, ultimate state of mind is tathāgatagarbha.

Under close examination, there are gross and subtle aspects of everything in the world. For example, matter at the grossest level is its solid state such as earth, stone, wood, etc.; the subtler, more transparent level is liquid; the next subtler level is gas; and further down the analysis, it is energy.

In fact, Buddhism discovered the existence of energy very early on. Although it is not called energy, it is a concept similar to that of energy, a very subtle matter that exists beyond our

perception.

Among the desire, form, and formless realms, the bodies of beings in the desire realm are formed by these very subtle matter. These subtle matter are similar to dark matter, energy, and other such things that people in the past, even scientists, never even thought of. Now that matter such as these are gradually being discovered, science is also beginning to move closer to the Buddhist view.

Sentient beings of the six realms also differ in terms of the gross and subtle aspects of their body and mind. At the very gross level are beings in the hell realm; their bodies, their environment, their suffering, and all other aspects are the coarsest. Next are animals and hungry ghosts. We can all see animals and some hungry ghosts occasionally; many of the possessed beings are hungry ghosts. Sometimes we may hear some people say they have seen ghosts. Of course, not all are necessarily true; some ghost sightings may just be their own illusions, but ghosts do actually exist and we have proof of that as well. More subtle than animals and ghosts are human beings. Their living environment, body, life, etc. are relatively more refined than beings in the three lower realms. Last are celestial beings. There are also three types of celestial beings—those of the desire realm, form realm, and formless realm. Their body, life, environment, wisdom, and so on are increasingly more refined, transparent, and subtle.

Besides the general differences among the six realms, there are also gross, medium, and subtle differences in each realm. This is just a law of nature.

Apart from external phenomena, our internal mental state has many aspects as well. At the very gross level are the thoughts that ordinary people go through in everyday life. The subtler aspect is the state of meditative concentration of humans and celestial beings. The subtlest is the tathāgatagarbha. In fact, the

state of the buddha is beyond the boundary of being subtle and gross. We can never describe it in words, only know it through personal experience. If you can feel it, it is realization.

Buddhist philosophy also has different levels. The sutrayana text *The Four Seals of Dharma*—all composite phenomena are impermanent; all contaminated things are unsatisfactory; all phenomena lack self-existence; nirvana is peace—tells the most superficial reality of things. The findings of scientific research, on the other hand, touch just the surface of what appears on the outside. Because the research covers only part of the superficial phenomena of matter and nothing on the mental aspect, it is not comprehensive and not complete.

To explain “affliction is bodhi,” sutra tells us although now we have afflictions like greed, anger, delusion, and so on, these afflictions can be transformed into wisdom by way of practicing the Dharma; the tantric view however is that at the very moment when strong anger arises in our mind, the essence of this anger is transcendent wisdom.

Some people might object to this viewpoint since they think: Anger causes sentient beings to be reborn in the hell realm. If anger is transcendent wisdom, then by extension, transcendent wisdom would also cause us to fall into the hell realm. That can’t be right!

Tantra would reply: Although affliction is transcendent wisdom, to an unrealized person, anger as it appears at the time is not the wisdom of the buddha. Like the analogy of a person born with gallbladder disease, a yellow object cannot be white.

To give another example, a few centuries ago when physics was not quite developed, if you said to a person with no knowledge of Buddhism, “The still object that you see now is actually moving. That which is still is moving; that which is moving is still.” That person, thinking it was pure nonsense, would counter, “If that be the case, wouldn’t black be white,

white be black, man be cow, and cow be man? This way, there would be no order, no principle in the world. That’s totally ridiculous!”

But nowadays even high school students know the still objects that we see are in fact moving constantly. Science has given us a very good method to introduce the fundamental viewpoints of Buddhism. With only some knowledge of physics, people can very easily understand these concepts today.

Other than the differences mentioned above, the way Vajrayana guides sentient beings on the path is also very unique. For example, there are many wrathful deities in tantra who are specially assigned to transform beings with fierce anger or hatred, as well as those with clairvoyance or magic power, particularly non-humans, rakshasas, and other spirits and ghosts. Regarding this, the sutra system offers no particular practice other than the practices of renunciation and bodhicitta. There are also many yab-yum (father-mother) buddha statues and practices in tantra that are used specifically to guide beings who have rather strong desire. In particular, people afflicted with both deep hatred and inordinate desire, like many vicious and savage rulers in the past, can be subdued by using the yab-yum images of certain wrathful deities.

Sutrayana however does not have specific methods such as these to deal with people who have serious aversion or excessive desire; having exhausted all other measures to subdue people’s negative emotions, it can only offer an aspiration: may I be able to free them from suffering in the future.

Although the wrathful deities are scary-looking, unlike the kind-looking peaceful deities, all deities, be they wrathful, peaceful, single, or in yab-yum style, are in fact manifestations of the wisdom of the buddha; in essence, they are not different from one another. It is just a matter of what we are accustomed to seeing.

Generally speaking, we are more receptive to the peaceful deities because we suppose deities should be kind looking; the tranquil look on their face also brings us joy. Whereas we find the wrathful deities a little harder to accept, sometimes even take a negative view toward them. But this is just our own discriminating mind at work.

## CONCLUSION

In short, many of the different views between sutra and tantra are presented here. The fact that there are these different viewpoints suggests it is only natural there are different practices, conduct, and results. From the discussion above, we can see that tantra is indeed quite remarkable.

With sutra, it takes at least three incalculable eons, or three great asamkhyeya kalpas, to attain buddhahood. *Asamkhyeya* is a Sanskrit word; it is a name for an astronomical number, the number  $10^{60}$ . Can you just imagine what that number means? *Kalpa* is a Sanskrit word for a unit of time; by human calculation, it represents a great length of time. As for three asamkhyeya kalpas, that's a time even more unimaginable. It goes to show that attaining buddhahood in the sutra system is really a very difficult, if not improbable, venture.

Whereas with tantra, attaining buddhahood can be rather swift, because it is the tantric view that sentient beings are in and of themselves already buddha. Sentient beings do not see themselves as buddha because their inherent buddha nature is covered by ignorance. Once ignorance is eliminated, its original face will be revealed, hence the quick result. On this, tantra really gives us great encouragement, power, and courage to go forward.

Naturally, it is not enough to just recognize the advantage of tantra in theory, or the rare chance of encountering tantric

teachings; we must also undertake the practices. But oftentimes our practice is less than satisfactory due to troubling afflictions; to actually realize the profound state in tantra would be even more difficult.

Data from the internet suggest that in the West, Vajrayana is the most popular among all the traditions and schools of Buddhism. The increase in Buddhists every year is comprised of fifty percent from Tibetan Buddhism, twenty five percent from Southern Buddhism, and twenty five percent from Mahayana Buddhism. Understandably, these numbers are not very precise. Newcomers in Vajrayana have actually increased more than fifty percent.

There are all types of sentient beings who follow Sakyamuni Buddha, and each one has his or her own way of thinking. Tantra offers many different methods that one can choose from, and its path is direct. These are the advantages of tantra.

Although tantra is supreme in both its view and practices, also capable of achieving results fast, it would not be effective without practice. However, to each individual, it is not easy to know which practice is the right one to follow. Milarepa's experience is a good example. Milarepa's first teacher was a well-known Dzogchen master in the history of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, but Milarepa did not gain realization from his practice of Dzogchen. Subsequently, he turned to Marpa Lotsawa of the Kagyu lineage and attained accomplishment.

We can assume that if Milarepa had not switched to the Kagyu practice but continued with Dzogchen, he would still have had difficulty attaining the ultimate result, regardless of how diligent he might have been or how extraordinary Dzogchen is. That's all because the Kagyu practice was the right practice for Milarepa, and Marpa was the teacher who had a connection with him over many past lives; it is simply a

matter of faculty and connection. Whether or not a teaching or practice is suitable depends on the faculty of the individual; it is not a problem of Dzogchen, nor of tantra, and certainly not of the Buddha.

Here, I have only given a simple introduction, not the specific practices, of Vajrayana. I don't think it is important for us to understand the tantric texts at this time. First, we need to practice the preliminaries to cultivate renunciation and bodhicitta, then practice the view of emptiness in the Mahayana tradition. Having built this base, we can then set out to learn something about the nature of mind from texts that are considered in between sutra and tantra, such as *Uttaratantra Sastra*. When all these are handled without difficulty and a taste of the more profound is somewhat experienced, one's capacity is basically mature at this point and ready for tantric practice. A prerequisite for tantric practice is to receive empowerment. I have also said before one must receive empowerment from a truly qualified vajra master.

We must know that we are living in a world which lacks purpose and is uninteresting. Now that we have finally found very meaningful work to do, we must cherish it. This work is to practice the Dharma.

## Vajrayana Terminology

The tantric path is also known as Vajrayana. Why is it called Vajrayana?

In the Buddhist scriptures, especially in tantra, the vajra symbolizes oneness; all things are one and the same, inseparable. What are one and the same?

In tantra, ground and fruition are one and the same; ultimate truth and relative truth are one and the same; clear light and emptiness are one and the same.

This is not the case in sutra, where ground and fruition are clearly separate.

In sutra, ground is the illusory world we see in front of us, which includes sentient beings, the external world of mountains, rivers, earth, etc., and emptiness; fruition is the attainment of the three resultant bodies of buddhahood—the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya. We ordinary people are not yet buddha, but through practice we can attain buddhahood after three asamkhyeya kalpas. Sentient being is the cause; buddhahood is the result.

According to tantra, sentient being is buddha, buddha is sentient being; samsara is nirvana, nirvana is samsara. The basic nature of samsara and nirvana is the same, but because we are not yet enlightened and still have afflictions, we see buddha and sentient being, wisdom and afflictions, separately as pure and impure. The tantric path is called Vajrayana because of this

view; it is unique in this sense.

There are two traditions in sutra: one is the common, or typical, sutra tradition that focuses mainly on the teachings of the Buddha in the first and second turnings of the wheel of Dharma; the other is the uncommon sutra tradition. Many of the scriptures in the Buddha's third turning of the wheel of Dharma dwell on the six perfections and the four methods of guidance that underlie the vast activities of the bodhisattvas, but there are also ten quintessential sutras that place a great deal of emphasis on luminosity of tathāgatagarbha, the luminous mind of the buddhas that is inherently present in each being; we call these ten sutras in the third turning the uncommon sutras. The view in uncommon sutra is entirely different from the view in common sutra, but very similar to that in tantra, even if it is not as clearly stated. For this reason, these ten sutras are said to be "half sutra half tantra."

Perhaps some will say although tantra maintains clear light and emptiness are the same, isn't it also taught in the sutra system that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," the two truths are one and the same? How is the view of oneness ascribed to tantra only?

On this question, we have to start by explaining the distinctions between ultimate truth and relative truth in sutra. The first kind of distinction is: emptiness is ultimate truth, everything else is relative truth; the second kind of distinction is: the luminous mind is ultimate truth, all other impure appearances are relative truth. That is to say, even though in sutra the view on the tathāgatagarbha in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma is essentially the same as in tantra, the only problem in sutra is still the separation of the two truths: the luminous mind, the fundamental nature of mind, is pure; afflictions are impure. In tantra, these two are integrated; ultimate truth and relative truth are one and the same.

In the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha focused on the subjects in the outer preliminaries, suffering in samsara, infallible karma, etc., which are the four truths of Theravada Buddhism, not so much on emptiness; in the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha also mentioned impermanence and suffering to some extent, but the heart of the teachings was emptiness; in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, emptiness was no longer the most important, rather the luminous mind became the main topic the Buddha expounded.

On this, the sutras have the following analogy:

During the time of Sakyamuni Buddha, people often went to islands far away to gather gems. The precious stones they brought back were, like electric lamps, used to light up a place. Nowadays, we don't hear about these precious stones, but in the days of the Buddha, they truly existed.

In the *Vinaya*, it is said: "The attendants to the king liked to use cloth of all colors to wrap the precious stones, and leave them in and outside the palace, even in the pool. They served as ornaments on the one hand, and also as a means of illuminating the place." As stipulated in the *Vinaya*, a bhikshu was not allowed to enter the palace before the precious stones were collected, that is, before dawn. Clearly, these precious stones existed at that time.

Originally, at the time the precious stones were extracted, they were covered with dirt and sand, and did not glow. The people who extracted them first placed them in a chemical solution to loosen the contaminants, then used a very rough piece of cloth to clear the dirt and sand; next they placed the stones in a finer solution and used a more delicate piece of cloth to clean them; finally they used silk to polish them until they were crystal clear—at that point the precious stones would light up.



This analogy tells us: during the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, sentient beings who came were of relatively low capacity; accordingly, the teachings focused on impermanence and suffering in the Four Noble Truths to help beings eliminate self-attachment and afflictions, namely desire, anger, and delusion, at the gross levels of mind. This is likened to the first stage of processing the precious stones.

During the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, Sakyamuni Buddha told sentient beings that all things from the five aggregates, or skandhas, to the buddha's wisdom are empty; all phenomena in samsara and nirvana are empty and beyond conceptual fabrication.

Please note that the concept of emptiness taught in the scriptures and the concept of emptiness in modern physics—whether in quantum physics or engineering technology—are different.

The perfection of wisdom practices in the second turning of the wheel of Dharma aimed at eliminating not only self-attachment and afflictions at the gross levels of mind, but also afflictions and all attachments—including the attachment to samsara and nirvana—at the subtlest level of mind. This is likened to the second stage of processing the precious stones.

During the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha said emptiness is not simply the negation of true existence; emptiness and the luminous mind are one and the same. The luminous mind is also a phenomenon, but this phenomenon is not something we can experience now with our eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body; it is the nature of mind. Although tathāgatagarbha is also empty, the Buddha did not focus on emptiness this time, since it was a concept familiar to everyone already.

In the second chapter of the *Lankavatara Sutra*, named “Collection of All the Dharmas,” there is this conversation

between the Buddha and his disciples in which the disciples asked, “So then, isn't tathāgatagarbha the same as Ātman, the true self, that is taught in the non-Buddhist systems?” The Buddha responded by essentially saying the “true self” in the non-Buddhist systems is not empty, but tathāgatagarbha is empty.

Of course, most of the sutras in the third turning of the wheel say the tathāgatagarbha is not empty, but there is no contradiction here. The essence of tathāgatagarbha, like all other phenomena, is empty, but the luminous, clear light aspect of tathāgatagarbha is not empty. This luminosity or clear light from which impure and pure appearances manifest is permanent and everlasting. The followers at this time had already established a foundation in the second turning of the wheel, so even if the Buddha used words like not empty, permanent, and everlasting to describe the tathāgatagarbha, they would not develop an attachment to clear light. It was perfectly clear to everyone—all phenomena, whether in samsara or nirvana, are completely empty of true existence.

This is why the Buddha gave the teachings in stages.

Practice is the same way. In the outer preliminaries, the main practice is the essential teachings of the first turning of the wheel; in the inner preliminaries, the main practices are those in the second and third turnings of the wheel that pertain to worldly behavior; the practice of emptiness, the core teaching of the second turning of the wheel, comes after the preliminaries; the practice of tantra that accords with the teachings in the third turning of the wheel is last.

Nevertheless, there is no literature in sutra that combines the concept of emptiness in the second turning with clear light in the third turning. Although clear light is mentioned occasionally in the second turning, the reference is not to clear light in the true sense, but to emptiness. The second turning

teaches “form is emptiness, emptiness is form”; however, form in this case encompasses all impure phenomena that manifest from the karmic actions of sentient beings, only emptiness is real. The third turning teaches clear light and emptiness are ultimate truth, impure phenomena are relative truth. The distinction between phenomena on the one hand and clear light and emptiness on the other is even more apparent.

It is in Vajrayana Buddhism that the two are truly integrated. Tantra does not place emphasis on either emptiness or on clear light; rather it completely integrates emptiness and clear light: clear light is emptiness, emptiness is clear light.

In the most basic tantra of Mahayoga—the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* in the Nyingma lineage, clear light and emptiness are also expounded together. To a person who has afflictions and karmic obstructions and has not attained realization, the world he perceives is impure; to a person who has attained realization and abides in the realm of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, these impure phenomena are all pure.

We cannot say that the pure world perceived by a buddha or bodhisattva on the eighth ground is perverted, that the impure world we perceive is actually correct. If we were to insist on being right, then by extension, the world would appear all wrong when we reach the eighth bhumi. Our practice would have done nothing but strengthened our obscurations, misconceptions, and delusions. I doubt if any Buddhist would agree with this!

Of course, the mandala perceived by a bodhisattva on the eighth ground, and a bodhisattva on the ninth or tenth ground is still somewhat different.

What does the mandala perceived by a bodhisattva on the eighth ground and by a buddha look like?

The word *mandala* is a Sanskrit term that means an encircled universe with a core center.

This mandala appears before all sentient beings during

bardo; at the time of death, an experience similar to the condition around the Big Bang in the universe occurs—our eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mental consciousness, as well as alaya consciousness all disappear or temporarily stop operating. The alaya consciousness is the carrier of all impure phenomena; when it disappears, a luminous state emerges. In tantra, this is called the ground luminosity or mother luminosity, the fundamental and original face of all phenomena. In Dzogchen, it is also called the clear light of death, because it cannot appear under normal circumstances, only at the time of death.

At the actual moment of death, it is necessary for the mother and child luminosities to come together. What is the child luminosity? The state of realization attained in one’s lifetime is called the child luminosity.

Highly accomplished practitioners have attained realization of the child luminosity already. At the actual moment of death, when the mother luminosity arises, they instantly merge the child luminosity with the mother luminosity and abide in this state. This is called liberation in the bardo.

In tantra, there are few practitioners of superior faculty who attain buddhahood in their lifetime, but practitioners of intermediate faculty can attain fruition in the bardo much more easily.

If a person has missed this opportunity to actualize buddhahood, the first thing that appears afterwards is the mandala of the buddhas. To a non-practitioner, the mandala at this time is likened to lightning and a meteor that flashes by; however, to an accomplished practitioner, the mandala remains somewhat longer.

In *Treatise on Realizing the Nature*, the first patriarch Bodhidharma made this statement that also accords entirely with the concept of innate purity: “The difference between sentient beings and buddha is the same as the difference between water

and ice.” Under normal temperature, water is a liquid; when the temperature drops to zero or below, it becomes a solid, but actually its essential nature is still a liquid; it has simply changed into a different form.

In the same way, our five aggregates are actually the five Buddha-families.

The real significance of the yab-yum, or father-mother, image in tantra is just this. According to the most definitive of the tantric texts, the father figure symbolizes the clear light aspect of tathāgatagarbha, the mother figure symbolizes emptiness; the union of the father figure and the mother figure is none other than the union of clear light and emptiness.

The other tantras also say when someone uses the finger to point at the moon, we should look at the moon, not the finger. Similarly, we should not obsess with the appearance of the yab-yum deities or how they are depicted, but rather focus on the underlying significance—the inseparability of clear light and emptiness that is the core and essential view in tantra. The yab-yum image is like a language, sign, or illustrated dictionary that uncovers the real meaning of the union of clear light and emptiness.

When Sakyamuni Buddha expounded the sutra teachings, all kinds of methods were also used. The Buddha understood different methods were necessary to transform sentient beings of different capacities.

## The Parable of a Black Snake

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Many of you may have heard of Rongzom Pandita or Rongzompa (1012-1088). He was one of the two greatest scholars of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, the other being Longchenpa.

When Rongzompa was just two or three years old, he could already speak Sanskrit fluently without ever being taught by anyone, not even his parents could understand. Around that time, Atiśa (980-1054) was in Tibet propagating the Dharma. His parents, wishing to enquire about their son, took Rongzompa with them to see Atiśa. Atiśa told the parents what their child spoke was Sanskrit, an Indian language. Subsequently, Atiśa held Rongzompa in his arms and engaged in a heated debate with him. Afterward, Atiśa said he was no match for the kid as Rongzompa was the emanation of two preeminent Indian panditas (scholar masters).

Rongzompa and Longchenpa were not only accomplished masters in their own right, but they also left behind substantial treatises on the Nyingma teachings that made tremendous contributions to the Nyingma lineage. Longchenpa’s works such as *The Seven Treasures* and *Seminal Quintessence in Four Parts* are the go-to books for anyone seeking to learn Dzogchen; they are supremely precious teachings and well-known as well.

Rongzompa lived some nine hundred years ago. Although his works were mentioned in his biography, some were damaged badly and lost forever due to poor printing technology at the time; hence, no more than four or five of them can be found today. Rongzompa's works focus mostly on Vajrayana and Dzogchen. Among them, there is one treatise which is succinct in style, less than two pages long, but rich in content, with a somewhat peculiar title *The Parable of a Black Snake*. Using a snake as an analogy, it presents a comprehensive analysis of the different levels of view going all the way from the Lesser Vehicle to Dzogchen.

### THE MAIN TEXT

The parable goes like this: A child threw a colorful cord into a cistern when the adults were out working. When they came back home, they found something in the cistern that looked like a snake. On this, the family members expressed five different points of view and behaved accordingly. The author, taking each person's viewpoint and behavior as indicators, reflected on the differences between the Great and the Lesser Vehicle, Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism, the Outer and the Inner Tantra, and lastly, the Inner Tantra and Dzogchen.

Without a doubt, everyone saw the same scene but, importantly, each person perceived it differently.

#### *View #1—Lesser Vehicle*

The first person, thinking it was a real snake, panicked and tried desperately to throw it away. But actually what he saw was not a snake, not even a shred of snake skin. It was all because he mistook the cord for a snake that he acted out of fear to get rid of it.

This example alludes to the Vehicles of Srāvaka (hearer) and Pratyekabuddha (solitary awakened one). The Pratyekabuddha Vehicle is further divided into two schools, Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika. All of them are generally referred to as the Lesser Vehicle of Buddhism.

The Lesser Vehicle holds that the only non-existent phenomenon is the self of the individual; everything else in the world, including all external objects, some mental elements, and the movement of physical and mental phenomena, truly exists. As practitioners of the Lesser Vehicle take afflictions to be real, they face more challenges trying to eradicate afflictions as well as having to observe more precepts, and take an overly cautious approach to handling any issue. These aspects are broadly discussed in the chapter "Wisdom" in Shantideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva* and in *The Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* (*Lamrim Chenmo*).

#### *View #2—Great Vehicle*

The second person did not think it was a real snake, only the form of a snake. That is to say, if one didn't look closely, it appeared like a snake but was in fact a cord. Even so, the person was still somewhat afraid of the image of a snake, which not only prevented him from touching it directly but made him look for other ways to dispose of it. This behavior alludes to the Madhyamaka school of the Great Vehicle (Yogācāra was not mentioned in this text).

Madhyamaka holds that all physical and mental phenomena are non-existent, empty and illusory like a dream. From the standpoint of absolute truth, all phenomena are without self, empty and luminous; but in relative truth, one should still be mindful of afflictions and exercise discretion in one's conduct. The view of Madhyamaka is that afflictions can be transformed

into the path of Dharma when bodhicitta and the view of emptiness are fully developed; otherwise, like the image of a snake, afflictions can still cause harm even if phenomena are immaterial and empty in nature.

In *The Ornament of Clear Realization* and the Prajnaparamita sutras, methods are often mentioned for transforming afflictions into the path. One of them is bodhicitta; for example, unwholesome deeds such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying are no longer deemed unwholesome if committed out of bodhicitta. Another method is gaining realization of emptiness; with this wisdom as a basis, afflictions stop being afflictions and are turned into the path naturally. Thanks to bodhicitta and realization of emptiness, afflictions are made useful; otherwise, in trying to fight afflictions head on, one could come upon harm, even end up in the three lower realms.

### ***View #3—Outer Tantra***

The third person took a look and knew right away the object in the cistern was not a snake but a look-alike; he also knew that no harm would come to him even if he touched the snake-like object directly without anything to assist him. However, due to habitual tendency, the image of a snake still terrified him greatly. Thus, he could not bring himself to touch the cord but dared others to throw it away.

Note that these are examples from India. During the time of Sakyamuni Buddha, there were primeval forests everywhere in India and vipers abound. In the Vinaya texts, we often find cases of a venomous snake hurting or killing people, also records of a snake crawling out from underneath a bed or dropping from the ceiling. So the Indians at the time were very much scared of snakes. Nowadays, the forests around Rajagrha have all disappeared and the perception of a venomous snake is

not so scary any more.

The example here represents the view of the Outer Tantra in Vajrayana.

The complete views and practices of the Outer Tantra are available in Tibetan Buddhism. I think some of the tantric teachings translated in the Tang Dynasty and that of Japan are part of the Outer Tantra, but I am not totally sure as I have not studied the Chinese tantric texts. Although the Outer Tantra is also Vajrayana, compared with the Inner Tantra, there are still quite some differences.

What is the view of the Outer Tantra? Firstly, in terms of realization of emptiness, the Outer Tantra and Madhyamaka are basically the same. Then, by practicing the generation stage (this is very different from the generation stage of the Inner Tantra) and reciting primarily the mantra of Vairocana, a practitioner can subsequently transform the ordinary body into the sambhogakāya body of the buddha. This is a rather distinctive view of the Outer Tantra. Even though practitioners of the Outer Tantra know ultimately this world will turn into the pure mandala of the buddha, they are unable to visualize this the way it is taught in the Inner Tantra. Nowadays, the yab-yum statues and some of the thangkas of wrathful deities that we see are only found in the Inner Tantra; they don't appear in the genuine Outer Tantra.

We all know that the Buddha transmitted the Dharma to followers according to their capacity and guided them on the path step by step. The Outer Tantra, having also empowerment, the practice of generation stage and so forth, is part of Vajrayana, but it lacks the view of the Inner Tantra. Hence, practitioners can only visualize themselves as they are in the present world (though sometimes they also visualize themselves as buddha), then visualize the buddha and the yidam in front and recite mantras. The Outer Tantra offers many ways to recite

mantras; it is of the view that one can attain buddhahood by way of mantra recitation.

When followers of the Outer Tantra practice in retreat, they are very particular about personal hygiene, keeping a vegetarian diet, and washing themselves three times a day; the focus is on one's conduct, and they do very well in this respect, but less so in the practice. Actually, the more one is fixated on the particulars of behavior, the more likely problems in practice will surface. The higher the state one reaches in practice, the more likely some improprieties may appear in one's conduct. Naturally, impropriety does not mean wrongdoings such as killing, stealing, lying and so on are casually tolerated. You can get a better understanding of this from the life stories of the eighty great siddhas of ancient India.

#### ***View #4—Inner Tantra***

The fourth person came back, took a look and knew it was just a cord in the cistern, not a snake, although it looked like a snake. Nor did he think the snake-looking thing would hurt anyone. He then picked up the cord and said, "What is there to be scared of? Where is the snake? This is just a cord!"

This refers implicitly to the Inner Tantra excluding Dzogchen. From the standpoint of Dzogchen, there is still a small problem with his view. Although he knew it was only an image of a snake, he was still attached to the notion of a snake. He acted this way deliberately to show he was not afraid.

#### ***Special Features of the Inner Tantra***

Note that, in the Inner Tantra, the practices of ngöndro (outer and inner preliminaries), the specific main practice, the six paramitas, etc. are no different from the other categories of tantra or even that of sutra. However, some uncommon

practices and conduct of the Inner Tantra are unique.

Take the example of afflictions such as greed, anger, jealousy, arrogance, etc. The Lesser Vehicle considers these negative emotions to be real; hence, in order to obliterate them, one must be armed with substantial opponent powers, or one may sustain real harm, which is a frightening prospect. The Great Vehicle, having understood more deeply the truth behind afflictions, does not think afflictions, the so-called five poisons or three poisons, have real property. But even so, in the illusory world, one still cannot face the truth directly but must rely on other external conditions such as bodhicitta to transform afflictions into the path. The Outer Tantra holds that afflictions are neither real nor fundamentally impure; instead, the five poisons can be transformed into the five wisdoms of the buddha, given certain conditions; without the right conditions, one is still afraid to confront afflictions directly. It is only in the Inner Tantra that the practitioner finally attains a profound state of realization.

Today, the complete lineage of the Inner Tantra can only be found in Tibetan Buddhism. It prevailed in India up until some eight or nine hundred years ago; when the Tibetans went to India to learn Buddhadharma, it was already difficult to come upon traces of the lineage. In ancient India, practitioners of the Inner Tantra were very discreet, the reason being that India at the time was a very complex place with people holding myriad and opposing views everywhere, a condition ripe for intense argument to erupt easily. Even Sakyamuni Buddha checked his words carefully when propagating the Dharma.

When the Inner Tantra came to Tibet, there were very few religious sects around, only Buddhism and Bon. Those who practiced the Lesser Vehicle also practiced the Great Vehicle simultaneously, and the Great Vehicle practitioners also took up Vajrayana practice at the same time. This tradition is upheld

even today in Tibet. Therefore, the Inner Tantra practice in Tibet is not as secretive as in ancient India but kept relatively open.

After many Buddhist temples were destroyed by Islam, not only tantra, which was not openly practiced in India, but also many lineages of the sutra tradition of Buddhism disappeared altogether as a result.

Nonetheless, Vajrayana was propagated in Tibet and the lineage of Tibetan Vajrayana kept intact and pure. As Vajrayana places great emphasis on pure lineage, requirement for oral transmission is absolute in order to stamp out false teachings. For the same reason, many strange terms are used deliberately in the Vajrayana texts so that only realized vajra masters can explain what they mean. Another feature of Tibetan Buddhism is to clarify questions through debate; any viewpoint, even just a sentence, can be traced back to its origin in these debates until finally it is proven the bona fide words of the Buddha. Thus, the doctrine of Tibetan Vajrayana is totally reliable.

It seems that the Inner Tantra is not found in the esoteric Buddhism of either Tang Dynasty or Japan but in Tibet only. So I think only authentic practitioners from Tibet really understand what the Inner Tantra is about; they are the real authority on this subject. Other than this group, no one else is qualified to define what Vajrayana is, no matter how grand a title one carries.

The view of the Inner Tantra is different from other schools. Simply speaking, in terms of the view on emptiness, all the schools from Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka up to the one below the Inner Tantra basically uphold the same idea, namely, to realize the truth of emptiness beyond all conceptual elaborations. But the Inner Tantra is notably different in one aspect: the sutra system holds as its supreme view that the appearance of all phenomena is exactly the same as we see it, that ordinary people take it for real while in fact it is spurious;

the Inner Tantra views all phenomena as illusory not only in reality but even from the standpoint of appearance—the stars, mountains, and rivers are not what we perceive but are manifestations of the pure mandala of the buddhas.

Actually, the sutra system also acknowledges the tantric view, just that it was not emphasized by the Buddha in his teachings to people of lesser capacity. In some texts, sutra assents tacitly to this view, claiming that when bodhisattvas attain the eighth bhumi, three transformations or three pure states take place. One of the pure states is purity of the five sense organs. When the five sense organs are purified, we see all things, including this world we are living in, as sublime as the Western Pure Land of Amitabha or the Eastern Pure Land of the Medicine Buddha. The Buddha told us in fact this world has always been this way, and has never changed. Because ordinary people have afflictive and cognitive hindrances, the true reality of the world is thus obscured. Upon reaching the eighth bhumi and having the five sense organs purified, only then will we see reality as it is. So, what is that reality? It is the mandala of the buddha, says Vajrayana. The Buddha expounded this clearly in many sutras, such as in the teaching of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* on dependent arising.

The Inner Tantra accentuates at the outset that this very moment is already the buddha's mandala, whereas the sutra system agrees tacitly that this will be the case when bodhisattvas reach the eighth bhumi, but it is not something that gets mentioned initially.

Of course, the mandala of the buddha also has different levels of significance. For instance, *Sukhāvatī* of Amitabha or the pure lands of the Five Buddhas, which manifest in forms and colors, are deemed at the lowest level. Normally, a buddha statue with head, face, hands, etc., representing the *nirmāṇakāya* of Sakyamuni Buddha, the *sambhogakāya* of Vajrasattva, or the

dharmakāya of Samantabhadra, is a provisional buddha whose manifestation serves to guide certain sentient beings to the path of liberation. From the Vajrayana perspective, it is not the real buddha and the buddha's mandala. However, compared to sutra, it is already a very definitive representation of the buddha and the mandala.

In this analogy, because the person did not take the cord for a real snake nor fear the image of a snake, he grabbed the cord deliberately and threw it out. Similarly, as practitioners of the Inner Tantra perceive all phenomena as immaculate and pure, they also consume the five meats and five nectars on purpose.

Under normal circumstances, the five meats and five nectars offered in certain practices are not for the public eye. Although these practitioners no longer differentiate between pure and impure in their minds, and are fully capable of receiving the five meats and five nectars, other people lacking the knowledge of their meaning may not accept, or worse, form the wrong view as a result. It is to protect the virtuous roots of other people that Vajrayana practitioners still follow the precepts of the Lesser Vehicle to regulate their own conduct in public or in general.

Why do practitioners of the Inner Tantra accept the five meats and five nectars? Like ordinary people who are scared of snake, they also have fear toward the five meats and five nectars due to the dualistic notion of something dirty or clean. But times have changed. For many, the five meats are no longer an issue, while the five nectars may still be rather difficult to accept. However, in Central India during the time of the Buddha, no one would ever eat any of the five meats, since they were considered dirty and vile. Unlike people today who dare to eat anything, even human flesh, we are at a loss for words to describe how utterly disgusted people were with the five meats in those days.

On the other hand, the state of a realized practitioner

is completely different. Post meditation, in the mind of a genuinely realized practitioner, all phenomena are pure; there is no notion of things like the five meats and five nectars. Moreover, from the standpoint of realization of emptiness, all is illusory; nothing is real. In order to strengthen or deepen these two insights, the practitioner will accept the five meats and five nectars directly and thus come to a profound realization that all dualistic notions of "clean" and "dirty," and the like are only one's attachment. Actually, accepting the five meats and five nectars is not a common practice of the whole Inner Tantra, but only a special feature of Mahāyoga.

#### *Common Questions on Tantric Practices*

Some may ask why practitioners of the Inner Tantra need to accept the five meats and five nectars if they have already attained a high state of realization. The reason is because doing so can help them make even greater strides in the practice so that they are able to overwhelm discriminating thoughts swiftly.

It is like chöd, the kusali chöd practice in the preliminary that cuts through the ego. However, kusali chöd is not considered a standard chöd practice. The real chöd practice has its own complete set of initiation and sadhana; it is in essence a prajnaparamita practice, also a sublime practice on emptiness in the sutra system. But a few skillful methods offered in chöd differentiate it somewhat from the exoteric practice. For instance, after receiving empowerment, chöd practitioners go intentionally to the dreaded charnel grounds, no less than 108 such places, to actually train themselves. These charnel grounds are not just ordinary charnel grounds but the most terrifying ones that are frequented by ghosts and non-humans. After arrival, practitioners need to use their own power of meditation to infuriate these evil spirits. And they must refrain from using



Guru Yoga or other such practices for assistance, since Guru Yoga can instantly quash any interference, e.g., the creation of terrifying scenes, from the evil spirits.

Why do they have to do this? The reason is that attachment to self is not easily detected even if it is like our own shadow. The moment a terrifying situation arises, however, it gets completely exposed: “Oh, this is it, I’m gonna die this time...” If we know how to handle the situation with wisdom, attachment to self can be eliminated right then.

Additionally, practitioners must also go to the mountains where ghosts and spirits reside—places that ordinary people dare not damage even a blade of grass. They purposely make a mess of the place, pollute the springs guarded by the dragons, or go to the dragons’ territory to annoy them; once the dragons are angered, the weather turns stormy within an hour with hail and torrential showers, thunder and lightning. Attachment to self also emerges suddenly; if meditation can be practiced at this point, it is very effective in cutting through the attachment.

Take another example. If one has a bad dream at night but does not know it is a dream, one will be as terrified by circumstances in the dream as by the same events in daytime; whereas if one knows one is dreaming, even jumping from the tenth floor of a building will not stir any fear. By the same token, genuine practitioners having attained realization of emptiness perceive no difference between things appearing in dreams and during the day. Aiming to quickly destroy attachment, they deliberately accept the five meats and five nectars which originally are regarded as defiled; it is not unlike jumping from the tenth floor of a building in the dream on purpose. Doing so lends particularly obvious effect on cutting through attachment and no harm to their practice either. From the standpoint of self-benefit, this is a very good practice. But from the summit of Dzogchen looking down, this is still

an attachment: if all are illusions, why bother doing anything intentionally? No need. Nonetheless, compared to the exoteric practice, this is already much advanced.

Although it is mentioned in both *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* and *Introduction to the Middle Way* that ultimately we must cut through all attachment, there is no one effective way to do that except to practice step by step—this starts with the generation of renunciation and bodhicitta, then the practice of emptiness over a long period of time; ultimately the goal can be reached this way.

Unlike the sutra system, tantra offers a rich selection of skillful means that combine the doctrines of renunciation, bodhicitta and emptiness with the uncommon tantric practices to achieve results much faster than would otherwise.

Some may question if practitioners have eliminated all attachment, does it mean they are free to commit unwholesome deeds like killing, stealing, lying and sexual misconduct? Of course not. Vajrayana stresses that practitioners in their realized state do not have attachment to the discriminating notions such as sentient beings, killing lives, or good and evil, but other beings still harboring such attachment will be hurt by the unwholesome actions. So, a genuine practitioner can never behave this way, nor is it permitted in Vajrayana.

Beginners of Vajrayana need not and are, in fact, forbidden to accept the five meats and five nectars. There is an analogy in the *Kalacakra Tantra*: Some people can cure their illness and prolong life by taking a medicine called Nectar of Brahmā directly, while others are not allowed to drink it but can only carry the nectar in a gawu box around their neck because they will die if they drink the medicine. Similarly, some people may greatly benefit from undertaking the kind of tantric practices that accept the five meats and five nectars, but beginners who try to do the same will incur much harm with no progress to

show for it. Therefore, these practices are off limits to them. If and when we reach a state of realization whereby we perceive all phenomena as a dream, with no attachment, we can then adopt the practices to speed up our progress. Of course, only Vajrayana offers such shortcuts; the other vehicles would find these practices unthinkable, let alone practice them.

How should beginners treat the five meats and five nectars? In Vajrayana, some nectar pills are made with more than a thousand kinds of herbal medicine. By adding a bit of the five meats and five nectars to the ingredients, these nectar pills are suitable for beginners. Naturally, if a beginner still finds such pills repulsive, he or she can refuse them as long as there is no outright rejection of or biased view against such practice, keeping in mind that the adverse reaction is only due to one's own immature capacity and rather inferior state of practice.

It is clearly stated in the tantric texts that beginners should not do what the yogis do, that yogis not act like realized masters, and realized masters not behave like the Buddha. Beginners aiming to make progress should start by undertaking seriously the practices of contemplating the rare and precious human birth, impermanence of all phenomena, suffering of samsara, etc., and adhering to the precepts rigorously.

Then, how do we classify beginners? Simply speaking, if someone, after swallowing poison that can otherwise kill an ordinary person instantly, is able to easily transform that poison into something harmless with nothing but one's own power of meditation practice, one is said to have graduated from the class of beginners. We can all measure our own state of practice against this criterion. If we fail to reach this level with our practice, we must be very vigilant with our actions.

Who can actually accept the five meats and five nectars? Those practitioners who are more than just beginners but have not quite reached the highest state in practice, that is, people

at the upper middle level, are suitable candidates. According to Vajrayana, practitioners at this level can increase their power of practice with this method.

However, not knowing what Vajrayana is, some people misinterpret, even criticize vehemently, some of the tantric practices such as accepting the five meats and five nectars.

Another common question pertains to the meditation deity (yidam) in Vajrayana, which appears in either peaceful or wrathful form. People in general are receptive to the peaceful deities but presumptuously consider the wrathful deities non-Buddhist. The fact is there is no difference between the two in essence. It is like everyone is happy to worship a gold Buddha statue but feels disgusted with or terrified by the golden image of a demon. But both are made of gold, just in different forms. Likewise, the true nature of the peaceful and wrathful deities are the same—both are enlightened manifestations of tathāgatagarbha, only with different appearances.

The sutra system also acknowledges tathāgatagarbha is luminous and empty at once, but neglects to mention that it may have multiple manifestations. However, we learn from the tantric texts that tathāgatagarbha is the true nature of all phenomena; to ordinary people, it appears as the defiled world we are in; whereas to realized beings, the manifestation of tathāgatagarbha is the mandala of the buddhas—the world of peaceful and wrathful deities.

Why do the deities appear in peaceful and wrathful forms? It is for the liberation of special beings. Normally, bodhicitta is effective in subduing evil beings. When Sakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment, he overwhelmed Mara's troops with bodhicitta; but it is only when one has garnered the same kind of power as the Buddha that bodhicitta can function effectively in this kind of situation. Bodhicitta is not useful against powerful demons that are endowed with great blessings

from a previous life. As demons are also subject to causality—some due to hatred, others the ripening of past evil aspirations that make them what they are now, which have little to do with renunciation and bodhicitta, only the appearance of wrathful deities can subdue them.

According to the authentic practice of the generation stage, if one intends to practice for ten days, the first seven or eight days should be reserved for the practice of peaceful deities; in the remaining two or three days, one must then change the practice of all the peaceful deities into the practice of wrathful deities. Some may even start with the practice of wrathful deities from the beginning because usually there are less obstacles with this practice, while more hindrances may appear in the practice of peaceful deities if one is not careful. Therefore, the practice of wrathful deities is a faster route to attaining accomplishment.

In terms of appearance, the wrathful deities look even more sinister than ordinary demons. People may easily mistake them for the deities of an evil cult if they do not know what the wrathful deities represent. For example, there is a blazing fire at the back of the wrathful deities and Dharma protectors, but white light at the back of the peaceful deities. Actually, fire here represents wisdom of the buddha—just like fire can burn down everything, so can wisdom cut through all afflictions. In addition, wrathful deities hold in their hands not bowls but human skulls, and the skulls contain not wholesome foods like fruit and grains but red blood. What does it mean? Blood represents desire, and desire is the main cause of ending up in the three lower realms. Drinking the blood represents eradicating completely the desire for samsara.

Those who have received empowerment can read up on the tantric texts to understand the inner meaning of tantric practices more comprehensively. It would be unwise to criticize or refute Vajrayana based on its outward representations simply due to

one's own ignorance. Tantric practices are supremely sublime; for a genuine practitioner, what these practices can achieve in terms of swiftly destroying attachment is quite obvious.

### *Problems at Hand*

Although nowadays lay practitioners of Vajrayana Buddhism in China have strong faith in the Three Jewels and Vajrayana teachings, many of them are not capable of discerning the genuine Dharma and are thus often blinded by the self-proclaimed masters or so-called “living Buddha.” This causes many problems and brings much negative effect on Tibetan Buddhism and Vajrayana in general.

The source of the problem lies with these lay practitioners. First of all, Vajrayana requires a practitioner to examine a teacher for twelve years before becoming a disciple. But these practitioners have not complied with this. Secondly, Vajrayana reiterates once a teacher-disciple relationship is established and empowerment received subsequently, one can only choose to leave, never willfully vilify the Dharma teacher if the teacher is found not qualified later on. However, many people not only fail to comply with the first requirement but also violate the second. Such behavior has already deviated from the tantric standpoint; it can only cause damage to one's practice and reflect badly on tantra.

These days we often see, either in books or on the internet, fake information made or collected by people bent on destroying Tibetan Buddhism. Some people who don't understand or have a negative opinion about Vajrayana also try many ways to hurt or attack Tibetan Buddhism. In my opinion, these actions are all meaningless.

Firstly, in our society today, it is absolutely normal to see an individual act recklessly, which however is not indicative of

the character of the group or the community that the individual is affiliated with. Besides, does it make sense to hold a religion accountable for the misconduct of a follower? Whether in Tibetan or Chinese Buddhism or other social groups, good and bad members always coexist. Can we portray Chinese Buddhism as a bad religion just because one monk does something wrong? A person's wrongdoing is just a personal problem, not the problem of a certain school or Buddhism as a whole.

It is very natural for a person to reject or even oppose a view or practice that he or she does not understand. Historically, no new theory, religion or things in general at its inception can escape being questioned or ridiculed, including many scientific theories. For example, there are still ongoing debates on the theory of relativity; the Bohr-Einstein debates on quantum mechanics also progressed over a very long period of time before the theory was finally accepted.

Similarly, when Mahayana Buddhism first emerged, it was attacked by many scholars of the Lesser Vehicle for not being the genuine teachings of the Buddha but a doctrine created by Nāgārjuna; there were all kinds of accusations. Many followers of Southern Buddhism still maintain this view today. Should we think something is wrong with Mahayana because of these dissent? The same happened with Ch'an Buddhism when it first appeared in China; it was derided by all including the emperors and the scholars. But now, we all recognize what a great tradition it is as it has produced so many accomplished masters.

Vajrayana is no exception. For more than a thousand years, Tibetan Buddhism only flourished in the confines of the Tibetan region. Now it is spread far and wide in the world, but not without a cause. Unlike some other religions, we did not exert great effort to propagate Tibetan Buddhism; it just grew naturally to its current state over a relatively short period of time for no reason other than its inherent advantage. If not,

would the science-oriented minds in the West so readily accept it?

Nowadays people often like to point out some senior monks or certain Dharma teachers disapprove of Vajrayana. I think their negative opinion is not the issue but whether their disapproval makes sense. It is ridiculous to condemn a religious tradition just because someone is against it.

I once read a Chinese book titled *Temptations under the Bodhi Tree*, possibly written by a non-Buddhist. The book describes the scandalous behavior of fake monks and nuns in China, and the impropriety of some monastics, but I have never considered it a reflection on Chinese Buddhism or the Chinese sangha as a whole. The contents of the book may not be all true, and at best only reveal the misconduct of a few monks or fake monks; they have nothing to do with Buddhism in China. I think people who attack Buddhism employ a line of reasoning which runs counter to true logic. Therefore, we must treat all Buddhist traditions with the right attitude.

Although I have not gained realization, I do have some knowledge about Vajrayana. In my opinion, some people basically do not understand the real meaning of Vajrayana nor try to learn more about it, but set out to slander or refute Vajrayana whenever the male-female tantric practice or five meats and five nectars are mentioned; they easily run the risk of creating negative karma of denouncing Buddhadharmā with such behavior. If they equate the tantric practice of male-female union with sexual intercourse and criticize carelessly, it shows just how ignorant they are about its true meaning. This is a pity. As for those people who do not believe in karma, there is nothing we can do regardless of what they say; but if they are Buddhists who sincerely believe in karma, we would advise against slandering Vajrayana at will. If you are not interested, you don't need to learn Vajrayana, but never make

defamatory remarks about it, as speaking ill words is the cause for committing serious oral karma and there is no way to avoid the resulting bitter fruit in future life.

In Vajrayana, the practice of partaking of the five meats and five nectars is not supposed to be talked about openly; much emphasis is paid on following the proper steps. However, in the hands of a few irresponsible people, this practice has already fallen into complete disarray. You may find on the internet today all kinds of descriptions of the practice that are quite ugly.

I have even heard some so-called tantric practitioners lie to have sex, claiming “if you do the union of male-female practice with me, you will achieve enlightenment.” Please note that if you run into this situation in the future, you must know the person who makes such a claim and the claim itself are both questionable. This is certainly not tantric practice; it is conducting an evil action in the name of Vajrayana. Vajrayana also points out if unwholesome deeds are committed in its name, they are considered more serious than the five hellish deeds. It is very important that we understand this clearly and correctly, and never blindly trust such people and such words.

### ***View #5—Dzogchen***

Despite the various views from the family members, the most senior person of the family thought if the object was just something that looked like a snake, why would it be necessary to pull out the cord to show that it was not a snake and that one was not afraid of it? It’s a laughable gesture, totally unnecessary.

This represents the view of Dzogchen. Dzogchen does not entail visualization, specific mantra recitation, the practice of wind and channels, or the five meats and five nectars. In Dzogchen realization, there is nothing to be practiced; the notion of whether or not to undertake practice or gain

realization is nothing but attachment. Just ignore.

Note that in tantra, there are two kinds of practice, the body and the mind. The two are closely related—if one focuses on the practice of the body, it can put mind under control, elevate and purify the mind so as to reach enlightenment; if one overlooks the practice of the body, such as the practice of wind and channels (*tso-rlung*), but emphasizes the practice of the mind instead, vajra body is equally attainable. The two achieve the same goal with different means. Mind can be explained on many levels. Here, it is used in a general sense, but not from the psychological perspective. In Buddhism, mind has two aspects, wisdom and consciousness; the two are entirely separate. Dzogchen practices only wisdom; consciousness is to be ignored. However, the sutra system never refers to these practices in its teachings, nor to the practice of attaining vajra body, focusing simply on realizing emptiness. This is an inadequacy of both the Tibetan and the Chinese sutra tradition.

This inadequacy has to do with the capacity of the practitioners of sutra. Only suited for the exoteric practice, they may be reluctant to accept the more advanced practices which in turn cannot benefit them either. Therefore, the Buddha taught in accordance with people’s innate ability, giving different levels of teaching to people of different capacity.

Why does Dzogchen not employ the generation stage, primarily visualization, or the completion stage with marks such as *tso-rlung* practice? To someone who has actually attained realization of Dzogchen, these are all superfluous, all fabrications that serve to distract mind from its core essence, which are useful only indirectly. This is why other schools need to use many circuitous methods to practice. Dzogchen on the other hand has a knack for direct approach—having grasped the true nature, the essence of mind, i.e., *tathāgatagarbha*, discriminating thoughts can be eradicated completely. This

method of directly pointing out the nature of mind (also the method of Ch'an Buddhism) is the Dzogchen way. Therefore, the authentic Dzogchen practice does not emphasize the generation stage and the completion stage with marks. However, the completion stage has two categories, with marks and without marks. Dzogchen belongs to the latter.

Dzogchen practice is really quite simple. Because it is the practice for the sharp-minded, some parts are a bit similar to the Ch'an practice. But the difference between the two is that one still needs to be trained in some specific practices before attaining realization of Dzogchen; once realization is attained, many practices then become unnecessary.

Practicing Dzogchen can help practitioners not only attain results in generation stage and completion stage but can also go further beyond. But if it is taught prematurely, practitioners can be sidetracked from the main path. Just like Ch'an Buddhism often advises to "let go of attachment," so subsequently followers stop all the virtuous activities such as life release or recitation of scriptures, thinking all such undertakings are attachment of sorts. Many problems arise because of this. Therefore, there is no hurry to discuss the specifics of Dzogchen right now; especially when not even the preliminaries have been completed satisfactorily, what good is it to delve into the more advanced subject?

If you want to learn Vajrayana later on, you must choose the authentic Vajrayana which can only be found in Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibet, many practitioners from the older generation whose lives were spent entirely on the study and practice of Vajrayana are the real lineage holders. If they don't know what Vajrayana is, no one does in this world. When there is a chance in the future, those who have received proper empowerment must try to learn some of the classics of tantra, such as *The Seven Treasures* by the omniscient Longchenpa and

*Essence of Clear Light* (commentary on the *Guhyaagarbha Tantra*) by Ju Mipham Rinpoche, to name a few. Those without prior empowerment should peruse these texts only after receiving the proper initiation. However, before attending the empowerment ceremony, one must be well informed about empowerment and the vajra master; this information is available in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and the discourses in this book.







## A Compendium of the Vajrayana

To someone who is adept in the philosophy and practice of the three vehicles of Buddhism, and also good at comparing and contrasting their respective views, tantra and sutra not only do not contradict, but rather complement each another. Although sutra casually touches upon the view that all phenomena are innately perfect and pure, it does not provide any corresponding method for practice. Tantra, on the other hand, expounds this view in depth and offers specific practice thereof.

### WHAT “ESOTERIC” BUDDHISM MEANS

Vajrayana is also known as Secret Mantra or Esoteric Buddhism. To understand the supposed secret nature of Vajrayana, several explanations can be found in the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. That is to say, the secrecy attached to this particular vehicle can be understood from two, three, or four different aspects. They are all correct explanations, just a matter of being broad or brief.

One of the simpler explanations is given from two aspects. One, something is hidden from the public eye. Two, something is kept secret. What is the difference between the two? In the latter, a deliberate action is taken to hide something from others; in the former, no action is required. It is naturally hidden, like the mineral deposits buried under the ground or the sea.

What is hidden? It is tathāgatagarbha. The Buddha did not



hide it from us, nor did anyone else. Instead, it is our innate ignorance and defilements that prevent us from knowing its existence. Although tathāgatagarbha has always been with us since our eight consciousnesses were formed, we do not see it. In fact, sentient beings in this boundless universe are basically not aware of this naturally hidden state.

There are six metaphors in *Dharmadhatustava (In Praise of Dharmadhatu)* and nine in *Uttaratantra Sastra* describing what tathāgatagarbha is.

What has to be kept secret? Actually, there is nothing in Vajrayana that is shameful or inappropriate and cannot be told. Rather, it is the profound and uncommon view of Vajrayana, such as the equality of defilement (*klesa*) and wisdom (*bodhi*), samsara and nirvana, sentient beings and the enlightened, etc., that needs to be kept confidential. If not, many people may end up with a mistaken view of Vajrayana because they cannot comprehend the concepts.

Most Buddhists accept that presently we are just ordinary sentient beings, not yet awakened; the world is, exactly as we see it, defiled and impure; afflictions are bad and always the opposite of enlightenment. Nevertheless, through long-term practice of the Buddhadharma, the impure can be transformed into the pure, the mundane world into pure land, afflictions into the wisdom of the buddha, an ordinary person into a bodhisattva of the first bhumi, then the second bhumi, the third .... and finally a buddha.

No Buddhist, not even the followers of Theravada, will refute this theory. However, if one were to say to them indiscreetly that defilement and wisdom, sentient beings and buddha are one and the same, the great majority would be extremely puzzled—if afflictions were the same as wisdom, why should one obliterate greed or hatred when it arises? If sentient beings were buddhas, by extension, sentient beings in the hell

realm would be buddhas as well. How could buddhas end up in the hell realm? If samsara were no different from nirvana, it would render the ultimate liberation that we strive to attain meaningless. Many questions of this kind would be raised since the concepts are profound and difficult to understand. But this is not the worst consequence. People in general have a lot of pride and tend to flatly reject different ideas that challenge their own. By voicing refutation of a valid Buddhist view, one runs the risk of producing negative karma of speech and unwittingly adopting a wrong view at the same time.

Therefore, in order to protect those with a propensity to follow the Buddhist sutric system or those who reject Buddhism entirely, Vajrayana cannot but take measures to prevent them from hearing some of its more advanced viewpoints prematurely. The intention is to guide them gradually to higher levels of understanding once they have the necessary capacity.

First, they need to understand the doctrines that samsara is unsatisfactory, human birth is rare and precious, and so on. Next, after they have made some progress, it must be pointed out to them despite the appearance of the phenomenal world, the self or “I” has in fact no inherent existence. One can be attached to everything else, but never to an inherently existing self. When the idea of not-self is fully comprehended, they can then be led to the next level—if the self does not exist, other things may not exist either because there is no reason for them to exist.

When their ability to reason is stronger and their capacity more mature, it is possible that, through training in the Madhyamaka methods, they will gradually discover nothing really exists; the truth of emptiness—empty of the self of person and of phenomena—may be realized all of a sudden, that is, although the eyes can see the world outside, all manifestations are without self nature, not substantial. Following this approach,

they may eventually gain insight into the inseparability of phenomena and emptiness. Thereafter, they should be told although their prior view is very good, there is still one defect. The nature of mind is in fact a thing called luminosity or clear light; that luminosity and the emptiness which they have already established are not contradictory. It is just that the idea of luminosity has been overlooked.

From this point on, the sutric teachings are less precise. To the questions of what luminosity signifies or how to attain the luminous state, sutra appears unable to offer satisfactory answers. Tantra, on the other hand, explains this clearly, leaving no doubt as to the meaning, the function of luminosity, and the way to attain it.

However, tantra must be learned step by step. In fact, one is forbidden to hear tantric teachings casually, that is, without any prior knowledge of and training in the fundamental Buddhist view, lest one should misunderstand and form the wrong notions about Vajrayana. Although the wrong view cannot do any real harm to Vajrayana, many listeners may thus be misled and inadvertently become victims of such a mistake. In order to prevent them from creating any negative karma and to protect their roots of merit, transmission of tantric teachings must be given with great caution, only when the timing and the conditions are right and the listeners are receptive to the teachings on hand.

Just as first graders cannot be taught college courses, practitioners of Vajrayana, especially the nine vehicles of the Nyingma school, must be guided on the path one step at a time. But this is only meant for people of ordinary capacity. Those with especially sharp faculty—who practiced Vajrayana or even attained certain accomplishment in previous lives and thus have inborn faith in the teachings—may easily grasp the essential points set forth in Vajrayana upon hearing them, all without any

prior training in subjects such as Madhyamaka or the like.

Actually, the view of emptiness—empty of the self of person and of phenomena—should not be disclosed to the public either. Between the two, the requirement for spreading the idea of no self of person is not as stringent; it is quite a different matter for the other. When expounding the notion of all phenomena being empty, devoid of inherently existing self nature, it is absolutely necessary to choose the right time and place and to evaluate the audience's ability to accept this uncommon view. One may otherwise run the risk of violating the bodhisattva vows.

Unfortunately, some Buddhists as well as others of different faiths tend to condemn Vajrayana openly for its need to keep certain views secret. This is not right. Even non-tantric Mahayana upholds confidentiality in the doctrine of emptiness. Does it mean the doctrine is flawed? Of course not. The Buddha promulgated his teachings in order to deliver sentient beings from all suffering, not to flaunt his own importance or unsurpassed wisdom, irrespective of the suitable time, place, and audience. So an orderly transmission of the Dharma is of particular importance in Buddhism.

The same principle also applies to bodhicitta. According to Asanga, bodhicitta is divided into aspiration bodhicitta and application bodhicitta. In tonglen, one of the practices of application bodhicitta, one visualizes taking onto oneself the suffering of others and giving merit and happiness to all sentient beings. If this teaching is given causally without taking into consideration the disposition of the audience, many people may think the practice is unreasonable and Buddhism is too extreme. Unable to understand the logic behind it, they may be even more reluctant to learn. Not that it is a problem if people choose not to learn Buddhism, but the consequences can be serious if they malign Buddhism because they think the doctrine

is unreasonable. Therefore, application bodhicitta should not be revealed to someone who is not a vessel of Dharma either; it doesn't mean there is anything dirty about application bodhicitta.

In general, the more profound the idea is, the more difficult it is to understand. The Buddha therefore said the more advanced teachings must not be told rashly when the right conditions are missing; however, with the right conditions, they cannot be withheld and must be propagated.

The “secret” nature of Vajrayana is thus explained in the *Guyhagarbha Tantra* from these two aspects which also encompass the explanations from three or four different aspects.

The Sanskrit word *mantra*, in Secret Mantra, is derived from the root *man*—“to think,” which is related to our mind, and the suffix *tra*—“to save or rescue.” The verse “to save sentient beings from suffering” in *Dharmadhatustava* also has this meaning, that is, to relieve sentient beings swiftly and successfully by way of two different methods. Sutra also aims to alleviate our afflictions, but tantra can accomplish the same more efficiently. Hence, Vajrayana is also referred to as Mantrayana.

We generally think of a mantra as something we recite, such as the mantra of Vajrasattva, but this is just one of its many meanings. Actually, the tantric view, conduct, and practice are all included in the mantra because they can all free us from our afflictions.

## THE VIEW OF VAJRAYANA

### *The Difference in the View of Sutra and Tantra*

A general picture of Vajrayana can be illustrated in terms of ground, path, and fruition, but I think an explanation of its

view, practice, conduct, and fruition would be more appropriate and comprehensible, also easier to remember. This brief introduction to Vajrayana covers primarily those essentials that beginners of Vajrayana are receptive to.

On the topic of emptiness, I have said before that emptiness is a Vajrayana view; on tathāgatagarbha, I have also said it is a Vajrayana view. The fact is that the true Vajrayana view combines emptiness (in the second turning of the wheel of Dharma) and luminosity of tathāgatagarbha, or luminous mind (in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma); they are indivisible.

Generally speaking, when sutra espouses the subject of tathāgatagarbha, the two concepts are not explained as a perfect union. The concept of emptiness was the key teaching in the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, whereas luminosity was hardly mentioned then. Even if the word luminosity was brought up, its interpretation was the same as emptiness. The third turning of the wheel of Dharma only focused on the luminous mind, very little on emptiness. Although sutra also acknowledges the indivisibility of emptiness and tathāgatagarbha, it does not think it necessary to repeat emptiness again when dealing with the subject of tathāgatagarbha, just like the textbooks used in elementary school are not reused after one graduates from elementary school. Similarly, the teachings of the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, such as precious human birth, impermanence, causality, etc., hardly appeared in the second turning. Not that the earlier teachings were no longer valid, they were just not repeated.

Unfortunately, nothing in the literature of sutra seeks to integrate the concept of emptiness and luminosity. Tantra, as explained in the fifth chapter of the *Beacon of Certainty*, emphasizes neither emptiness nor luminosity but combines the

two concepts.

Although sutra mentions luminosity as well, it offers no practice other than the practice of emptiness in the second turning of the wheel of Dharma. The past masters indicated as such; this is also a fact we can discern from any sutric scripture.

What is missing in sutra is expounded in full detail in tantra. Tantra provides many comprehensive practices not only on emptiness but also on the union of appearance and emptiness, i.e., the practice of luminosity. These are not at all available in sutra. In addition, the practice of pure perception is essential to tantric practice, but not found in sutra either.

What is the practice of pure perception? Sutra acknowledges that one begins to see the reality of the surrounding world, a world of pure displays, when one attains realization of the eighth-bhumi bodhisattva. However, it offers no specific method for reaching this state; pure perception will naturally manifest only after undertaking the sutric practice for a very long time. Therefore, to achieve pure perception in the sutric system is a slow process.

In most of the literature of sutra, our world, the Saha world, is deemed an utterly impure place. But that is not the case in tantra. In the tantric view, this illusory world that we see today is innately pure; it is just that we have never seen its true nature—vacuous, luminous, and also pure. It is what the bodhisattvas of the eighth bhumi and above perceive, a world as pure as Sukhavati.

The key discrepancy between sutra and tantra lies in their meditation practice. Many of the practices are completely different, and naturally so are their results and the speed of attaining such results.

The tantric view, albeit not unprecedented, still differs from sutra to a certain extent. For example, although both explain the concept of emptiness and luminosity, we first need

to distinguish between (subjective) realization and (objective) emptiness or luminosity.

The subjective enlightened state means “that which knows” in Buddhist terminology. Objective emptiness has nothing to do with one’s realization. Whether one is enlightened or not, all mental and physical phenomena are empty of self nature. This in Buddhist terminology is called the “object” or “that which is known.” From the objective point of view, the idea of emptiness is the same in both sutra and tantra. However, on the paths of accumulation and preparation, sutra and tantra differ in terms of the view of emptiness and luminosity in the subjective enlightened state. Upon entering the path of seeing, this difference disappears and the two are in agreement. Therefore, sutra (exoteric Buddhism) and tantra (esoteric Buddhism) actually complement, not contradict, each other. Being exoteric or esoteric only describes the two different perspectives taken to explicate the same doctrine. Both are correct but with different approaches—directly or indirectly—to realize the true nature of all phenomena.

### *The Two Truths of Vajrayana*

When explaining the view of Vajrayana, it is essential to first introduce the two truths in the Vajrayana context.

In fact, everyone, or every school, has a set of two truths which is entirely its own.

For worldly people who have never studied Buddhism or any other spiritual doctrine, dreams from sleep, magic from the magicians, mirage, and all things, like illusions, which have no real functions or don’t exist in the real world represent relative truth; all things that can be seen and touched, such as buildings, cars, people, mountains, rivers, etc. are ultimate truth. Prior to learning Buddhism, we also held the same view that

material things like money, food, clothing, etc. are the only real necessities in life. Dreams and fantasies are not of much help to us, so they are relative truth. This is relative truth and ultimate truth at the lowest level.

In Theravada, it is common knowledge that gross matter (in terms of physical phenomena) and coarse thoughts (in terms of mental phenomena) are deemed relative truth. The indivisible moment of consciousness or the indivisible particle is ultimate truth.

In Yogācāra, all that appear to us as matter, or that seem like matter to us, are considered relative truth. They are only creations of the mind and do not actually exist. The all-creating mind is ultimate truth. Mind in this context is the alaya consciousness; it is substantial and existent.

This view of the mind is the biggest and only mistake in Yogācāra. Aside from this, its views on the external world being the product of mind or the mind itself, on the six paramitas, the four ways of gathering sentient beings, the five paths, the ten bhūmis, buddhahood, and so on are all good and acknowledged by the Madhyamaka school as well.

In Madhyamaka, emptiness is ultimate truth. All matter after thorough analysis are found to be empty of inherent existence, truly vacuous; physical phenomena clearly do not exist, but in the state of ordinary sentient beings, these illusory manifestations are real. This illusory, dream-like world is relative truth. Madhyamaka further divides relative truth into correct and incorrect relative truth.

Correct relative truth refers to karma, samsara, and so forth. Although they don't exist from the point of view of emptiness, mind and matter do exist in the mundane world. Incorrect relative truth primarily refers to the notion that matter actually exists.

Ordinary people's ultimate truth is Theravada's relative

truth; Theravada's ultimate truth is Yogācāra's relative truth; Yogācāra's ultimate truth is Madhyamaka's relative truth; and Madhyamaka's correct relative truth is Vajrayana's incorrect relative truth.

For example, without an understanding of Madhyamaka, an ordinary person takes anything he or she sees as real and existing. This is deemed incorrect relative truth because even in the mundane world, no inherently existent mind or matter can be found; all are illusory manifestations. Therefore, it is an incorrect view to acknowledge any phenomenon as truly existing, hence the designation of incorrect relative truth.

Now the most important point is to understand Vajrayana's relative and ultimate truth. In Vajrayana, ultimate truth comprises two parts. Emptiness is one part of ultimate truth; the doctrine of emptiness elucidated in the Madhyamaka treatises such as *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, *Introduction to the Middle Way*, and so forth is completely accepted and deemed true reality. The luminous mind, as set forth in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, is the other part of ultimate truth. Vajrayana combines the essential points of the second and the third turning of the wheel of Dharma to establish ultimate truth. Apart from this, there is no stand-alone ultimate truth that is totally unrelated to the second and the third turning of the wheel of Dharma.

To explain this in two parts is only for ease of understanding. There is in fact only one ultimate truth—luminosity is emptiness, emptiness is luminosity, they are one and inseparable. tathāgatagarbha, at once luminous and void, is the nature of mind, the original face of reality, primordial wisdom.

The practice of Dzogchen, or Great Perfection, has many levels. At the lower level, it is called bodhicitta, primarily absolute bodhicitta; at the higher level, it is called primordial

wisdom. Primordial wisdom, bodhicitta, tathāgatagarbha, buddha nature, emptiness, Mahamudra, Mahamadhyamaka, and so forth are different names for the same thing. In sum, this is ultimate truth in Vajrayana.

As for relative truth in Vajrayana, there are also two categories, namely correct and incorrect. What Yogācāra and Madhyamaka deem correct relative truth is Vajrayana's incorrect relative view.

For instance, sutra generally maintains that as long as we perceive the impure phenomena around us, no matter if they are people or buildings, as illusory with no self-nature, it is correct relative truth. But Vajrayana takes the view that the world we see is incorrect—we have never seen the true face of ultimate reality, not even the true face of relative reality. The external world that we see is actually the mandala of the buddhas. In Vajrayana, the mandala of the buddhas is correct relative truth.

Please note that although sutra often speaks of emptiness and clear light as well, this view of the mandala of the buddhas is never mentioned, nor will it ever be mentioned. According to sutra, upon reaching the state of the eighth-bhumi bodhisattva, when the mind is pure enough, the world around us will naturally turn into pure phenomena. But still, this is a rather unfamiliar and unexpected state; sutra has never provided any method to attain this state. Tantra, on the other hand, offers the practice of purification, that is, the generation stage, to quickly accomplish this goal. Furthermore, in the view of tantra, it is not that phenomena are purified via such practice but they are inherently pure in the first place. What the eighth-bhumi bodhisattvas perceive is, like the nature of mind, something we cannot see now but it is the true state of reality at the present moment.

According to tantra, not only the nature of mind is luminosity and emptiness combined, but impure phenomena

that appear to us in relative reality are also not impure. Impure phenomena are the product not of cognitive analysis but our perception; however, our perception is regularly fraught with problems, hence what is perceived is a mistaken view of reality. Sutra maintains the problem lies not with our perception but with our attachment to perceived reality.

These views are presented and explicated in the first chapter of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*; detailed explanations on how the mundane world can be the mandala of the buddhas are given at the same time. To someone who is trained in sutra but not in tantra, ultimate truth in sutra is irrefutable, ultimate truth in tantra is very complete in itself. However, in terms of correct relative truth, there are differences between the two traditions, which some may find difficult to comprehend.

### ***Corroboration from a Sutra***

To people in general, seeing a person is one thing, seeing the mandala of a buddha is quite another. Could this person be in fact a buddha? If the answer is no, then how should we understand the idea that the mundane world is actually the mandala itself? To help clear these doubts, I shall borrow a paragraph from the first chapter, “The Purification of the Buddha Field,” in the Chinese edition of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*. It is said in the sutra not only the nature of mind is luminosity and emptiness combined (this is nothing new as many other scriptures also state the same) but also the world we are in today is a pure world, except that we don't see it.

The following discourse took place before this paragraph. In an assembly of bodhisattvas, Sakyamuni Buddha said to everybody, “When the mind of a bodhisattva is purified through learning the path of Dharma, the realm of the bodhisattva is also purified; when the mind is not pure, the realm of the

bodhisattva cannot be pure either.” Upon hearing the Buddha’s words, the Venerable Sariputra through the blessing of the Buddha raised a thought: This being the case, could it be the Buddha’s mind was impure while cultivating the bodhisattva path, since his realm, the Saha world, is so impure? Knowing this thought on Sariputra’s mind, the Buddha carried on a very interesting conversation with him.

The Buddha said, “What do you think, Sariputra? A blind person cannot see the sun or moon, is this the fault of the sun and moon, or the blind person?” Sariputra replied, “No, it is not the fault of the sun and the moon. The fault lies with the blind. The sun and the moon are quite clear. Just the blind cannot see them.”

The Buddha declared, “Likewise, Sariputra, sentient beings do not see the splendor and purity of the buddha field of the Tathagata due to their own afflictions. The Tathagata is not at fault. It is sentient beings who are impure, not the Tathagata. The realm of the Tathagata is very pure, you just don’t see it.”

At this point, an Elder from another universe, with long coils of hair on top of his head, kind of holy-looking, interrupted and said, “Sariputra, please do not think or talk this way. Stop saying the realm of Sakyamuni Buddha is not pure because I see it as pure as the palace of Mahesvara in the form realm.”

Sariputra answered, “The world I see is different. There are hilly terrains, bumpy roads, thorny plants, sands, rocks and mountains everywhere. All I see are impure phenomena.”

The Elder said, “Respectful One, it is your own discriminating mind. As you have not yet gained the wisdom of the Buddha, the world appears to you impure. Actually, Sariputra, there is no difference between sentient beings and bodhisattvas. Only when the mind is pure can one gain the wisdom of the Buddha and see the pure realm of Sakyamuni

Buddha.”

While Sariputra and the Elder were having a heated discussion, Sakyamuni Buddha proceeded to display his miraculous power to prove the Elder was right.

Thereupon, the Buddha pressed the ground with his toes and everyone there saw a multitude of universes adorned with myriads of splendid jewels as glorious as the buddha field of the Jewel Adornment Buddha, a realm full of infinite merit and as pure as Sukhavati (nothing in this buddha field is defiled).

Besides being amazed by this phenomenal sight, the audience exclaimed with wonder when they discovered that every one of them was sitting on a lotus throne. At the time, the people in the audience had not yet completely eradicated their defilements. So, by definition, they were not supposed to see the pure buddha field at all. However, helped by the Buddha’s inconceivable divine power, they could all see the true reality of the world instantly.

The Buddha told Sariputra, “For the moment, just look at the innate purity of this buddha field!” Sariputra said, “Ah, Blessed One! I have never seen nor heard of such a scene. The buddha field of Sakyamuni Buddha that I see today is entirely pure.”

The Buddha told Sariputra, “My world has always been this pure. It is for the deliverance of sentient beings with inferior faculty that all these impure phenomena manifest.”

Then the Buddha gave an analogy, “Just like the celestial beings all sitting at the same place, using the same ornamented bowls to eat the same food, how the food tastes may vary greatly according to each one’s own merit. Likewise, Sariputra, if one’s mind is pure, one can see the glory of the pure buddha field.” When the Buddha finished talking, many in the audience aroused bodhicitta and realized emptiness right then and there.

The Tibetan version and the Chinese version of this

section of the sutra are exactly the same and both translations are also very good. In this section, it is explained that not only the nature of mind is at once luminous and empty, but also all phenomena that we see are pure, even from the standpoint of relative truth—the body of sentient beings is endowed with the thirty-two excellent signs of a buddha and the worlds around us are all buddha fields. We don't see them as such because we have not yet learned and practiced the Dharma.

In order to reach this state sooner, we ought to speed up our practice. The best and the fastest way is through the practice of the generation stage, which is not taught at all in sutra. The sutric teachings only tell you that eventually the pure realms will be seen and buddhahood attained by engendering bodhicitta, accumulating merit, and cultivating the view of emptiness for an extremely long period of time. Nothing more is said.

Please note what Sakyamuni Buddha said above is crucial. The Buddha did not say this to just anybody. All followers of the Buddha should acknowledge this point. It does not matter whether one practices sutra or tantra; as long as one professes to be a Mahayana practitioner, one must acknowledge the teachings in the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra*. A person who rejects the words of the Buddha is not considered a Buddhist.

### ***The Sublime View of Vajrayana***

To someone who is adept in the thought and practice of sutra and tantra, and also good at comparing and contrasting their respective views, sutra and tantra not only do not contradict, but rather complement each another. Sutra also talks about the view of pure perception, but only lightly, and does not provide any corresponding method for practice. To rush followers of sutra to accept the uncommon tantric views would only confuse more than enlighten them.

We normally do not want to spend too much time or effort to read and understand the *Tripitaka* and various Buddhist scriptures. The fact is that if we had read these sutric scriptures, we would have understood that the uncommon view of Vajrayana—such as sentient beings and various buddhas, the mundane world and the pure realm are one and the same, and so on—are actually distilled from the contents of the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra* and made more refined in terms of profundity. Besides this, there is really nothing new in Vajrayana that is unacceptable.

The one feature that points to the superiority of tantra over sutra is the incisive explanation of the concept of pure perception, which sutra only provides in general terms. For example, tantra explains precisely what the five aggregates and the three poisons of mind will be transformed into respectively when the world looks pure, while nothing of the kind can be found in either the texts or the transmissions of sutra. Another feature of tantra is that it also provides the method to cultivate the view of pure perception.

Although there are differences between sutra and tantra, we should never think they are contradictory; even among the schools of sutra, discrepancies exist, such as between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, as well as Mahāyana and Theravada. The fact is Yogācāra resolves the questions that Theravada fails to answer; the inconsistency in the Yogācāra discourse that the school cannot fix on its own is ultimately resolved by Madhyamaka. Therefore, the more advanced the school, the more complete is its view. Still, the various schools essentially complement rather than contradict one another.

### ***How to Develop the View of Vajrayana***

Although the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* is classified as a Mahayoga



tantra, it contains a substantial amount of the contents in Anuyoga and Atiyoga. It is in fact the foundation of the corpus of Nyingma scriptures, of which the rest are all its branches. If we want a comprehensive understanding of Vajrayana, we must learn the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*.

However, there is only one Chinese translation of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* so far done by Khenpo Sodargye, a commentary by Ju Mipham entitled *Essence of Clear Light*. Overall, the commentary gives quite a clear explanation of the tantra but not in sufficient detail. As far as I know, presently almost none of the other Chinese translations that pertain to the tantra provide explanations in any detail. But this is not a big problem. One should just learn whatever there is to learn. Normally, it is better to teach tantra to those who have already generated renunciation and bodhicitta. But judging from the current situation with most people, the wait can be very long indeed.

Knowing life is impermanent and human birth is precious, it is most unfortunate that many practitioners have great faith in tantra but know almost nothing about its views and ideas. This is why I have decided to give an overview of the Vajrayana first. As for the actual practice, once genuine renunciation and bodhicitta are generated, we can begin to learn some of the practices of the generation stage and the completion stage without marks, that is, the practices associated with Mahamudra and the Great Perfection. The practice of the completion stage with marks mainly refers to practices known collectively as “winds, channels, and essences”; it is a rather complicated system of practices which we hardly employ nowadays. Naturally, one should not assume the preliminaries are no longer necessary now that one can hear the tantric teachings.

Without the preliminary practice and the generation of renunciation and bodhicitta, the advanced teachings will not

be helpful and may actually do you more harm than good. If I only say to you, “Vajrayana practices are very profound and extraordinary. Complete your preliminary practice as quickly as possible so as to move on to the main practice of Great Perfection.” It will give you a target, something to look forward to, and inspire you to work harder on your preliminary practice. On the other hand, if I were to disregard the proper order and teach the five preliminary practices along with all other Vajrayana practices, you would be confused and unable to grasp the essence therein. With no sense of accomplishment and little to look forward to, you may abandon the preliminary practice. Therefore, I believe it is crucial that everyone starts from the very beginning, first with the generation of renunciation and bodhicitta. Absent the preliminary practice, nothing can be accomplished at all.

Those who have completed the inner preliminaries once ought to repeat them again, with the focus on bodhicitta, Vajrasattva, and Guru Yoga. Those who have never practiced the preliminaries must start from the outer preliminaries, beginning with meditation on precious human birth. When one undertakes the tantric practice after completing these preliminary practices, realization can be attained for sure.

Vajrayana is suitable for both lay people and monastics. It is just that the monastics have more time and freedom to focus on the practice. Naturally, if the monastics were to allow themselves to be idle and easily distracted, they would be no different from lay practitioners.

With regard to the Great Perfection, the only way to attain realization is through one’s unwavering faith in the Great Perfection and the guru. Mipham Rinpoche in his *Commentary on the Eight Sadhana Teachings of the Assemblage of Sugatas* also said the same. It means that of all the requirements for attaining realization of the Great Perfection, these two are the most

crucial. However, faith alone without the support of the preliminary practice or bodhicitta still will not yield any result.

People often say that obstacles, such as discursive thoughts, sleepiness, fatigue, etc., appear frequently during meditation practice. One need not worry too much about this as it happens to all beginners. It is always difficult at the start of anything. Buddhadharmā is no exception either. As long as one remains determined, the path will become easier and smoother as time goes by.

### THE CORRECT RELATIVE TRUTH OF VAJRAYANA

—*All Phenomena are the Mandala of the Buddhas*

#### *The View*

All phenomena seen by ordinary people are manifestations of the mind. This is consistent with the view of Satyākāravāda (True Aspectarians) of Yogācāra. It also does not contradict the view of Alikākāravāda (False Aspectarians) that external objects are not the mind, but cannot be separated from the power of mind; they are illusions created by the mind. Whether external objects are manifestations of the mind or illusions created by the mind, they are not separate from the mind. If the mind does not exist, external objects cannot exist either.

In other words, all that we see is not external but the cognition of our eye consciousness; all sounds are the cognition of our ear consciousness. In fact, all smells, tastes, and touches are nothing but our own cognition. Other than the cognition of mind, there is no real world out there.

This is also the main dispute between Yogācāra and Sautrantika. Yogācāra holds that an external world cannot possibly exist outside of our own cognition. Just like in dreams nothing really exists, in actual life there is nothing but our

cognition. They are all just illusions. However, there is still a difference between dreams and actual life in terms of habitual tendency and causal condition. Because the seed of habitual tendency in actual life is relatively more stable, one does not feel the external objects in life are as illusory as in dreams. What separates life and dream is just a matter of how stable the seeds are in the alaya consciousness. Aside from this factor, the two are completely the same. However, the view of Sautrantika and Sarvastivāda is that all phenomena in this world can be explained only if the external objects (matter) exist.

Both schools maintain that when the image of an object appears in our minds, we think we are analyzing something outside. But the fact is no one can really analyze things outside because they are not in any way connected with our minds. For example, when two people try to analyze or explore the nature of matter, one says that all matter is impermanent while the other insists all matter is constant. No matter what the conclusion is, neither one can actually change the true nature of matter. But we need the illusion that the world is how we define it; without this illusion, we cannot think, analyze, or explore anything.

In the sutric literature such as *The Ornament of Clear Realization* and *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, it is said that when our minds are gradually being purified and transformed into pure awareness, all phenomena will become the manifestations of wisdom. The tantric view is that even before our cognition is transformed, its essence and its inherent nature are also the wisdom of the buddha. Just as Bodhidharma said in his *Wake-Up Sermon*, “The unawakened and the enlightened are like water and ice.”

For instance, we usually think that the eight consciousnesses, the six sense organs and their corresponding objects, the five aggregates, and time (past, present, future, and indeterminate

time) are the parts that constitute a person, like the components of a machine. There is no independent existence of a person apart from these constituent parts which are all identified as “I”. They are also the objects of attachment to self. In Vajrayana’s view, when we eliminate all afflictions and attain buddhahood, these constituent parts or their true nature at that moment represent the mandala of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities.

We normally think that some bodhisattvas are in the east and some in the west. Regardless of which direction, all of them abide in another world, another buddha field far away from us. Accordingly, the Medicine Buddha and Amitabha are not in any way connected, as Amitabha resides in the west realm of Pure Land and the Medicine Buddha in the east realm of Pure Lapis Lazuli. They are very far away from each other and even farther from us, so little connection can be established.

However, Vajrayana tells us that the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities contain all the main yidams of Vajrayana Buddhism and that the one hundred deities are in fact our mind—when one attains enlightenment, this is the state of mind. Naturally, it does not mean all the images of the deities, like the components of a machine, make up our whole being. But through careful contemplation, we should come to realize that all appearances to the eyes are no more than our eye consciousness which is actually part of ourselves.

All the Vajrayana literature basically expounds the same view with only minor differences in some details. On the surface, each of the one hundred deities is an independent entity, thus Manjushri is not Chenrezig, and vice versa. However, this view is not even endorsed in sutra which holds that inconceivable states often appear when bodhisattvas attain realization beyond the eighth bhumi—the virtuous root planted by Manjusri is the same as that by Samantabhadra, the virtuous root planted by

Samantabhadra is the same as that by Chenrezig, and so forth. In fact, the virtuous root planted by any one of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas belongs to all of them. This is because attachment to self is eliminated at the eighth bhumi. Although it is not yet buddhahood, nor is the remaining habitual tendency of attachment to self completely destroyed, there is nothing to separate the bodhisattvas from one another any more as they are on the verge of becoming one. Just like an organic whole that is being separated by outer force, when the obstruction disappears or is removed, it will become whole again. The view of ordinary people is this: I am I; I am not he or she. So one hundred individuals are one hundred distinct entities. Notions such as these come from our attachment to self. When this attachment is obliterated, all people will become one.

If sutra already has such an insight, tantra takes it even further. The view of tantra is that the one hundred deities, whether they are buddhas or bodhisattvas (the two attainments are different), may appear to us in different forms, but they are really one and the same; all are just our own eye consciousness. Because of the different appearances produced by the eye consciousness, we think the deities are distinct entities but this is only our misconception. The truth is that all the deities, both peaceful and wrathful, are present in our minds. Their primordial nature is *tathāgatagarbha*—the unity of luminosity and emptiness, just like in physics the radioactive ions are capable of emanating waves or light. Before enlightenment is attained, the world appears impure. But the mandala of the buddhas can manifest under the following four conditions: when winds, channels, and essences all dissolve into the primordial luminous mind in the intermediate (*bardo*) state; when buddhahood is attained; and when certain stability is gained in the generation stage or in *tögal* practice. This happens because the pure realm of the divine—phenomena emanated

from the luminous mind—inherently exists; it is the nature of mind.

### ***Partial Evidence***

There is substantial evidence to prove this point. First, when we die—even if we have never undertaken the generation stage practice or heard the Vajrayana teachings before, we will all have a vision of the mandala of the Hundred Deities at the moment of death.

Why can an uninitiated see the mandala at the time of death but not in his or her lifetime?

There is an interval for regression between two life cycles. From birth to death is one life cycle. It is like the celestial bodies—the earth, the moon, the Milky Way, even the whole universe; when their respective cycles come to an end after billions of years, they return to their original state. At the time of regression, all things that move will go back to their origin—everything previously released from the consciousness of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body will begin to recede. The five consciousnesses dissolve into mind consciousness, mind consciousness into alaya consciousness, alaya consciousness into alaya. The alaya also ceases in a flash. At this very moment, the mandala will manifest as vividly as the appearance of the blue sky after the dark clouds dissipate.

Second, when practicing tōgal, the practitioner will see the mandala of the buddhas simply by abiding in the luminous state, even without having to visualize anything.

These represent relative truth in Vajrayana and therefore deemed the provisional meaning of the *Web of Magical Illusion*. The ultimate state is one that surpasses this level and arrives at the primordial state, the luminous mind, wherein no color or form of any kind is found. Only this state—the nature of mind,

the all-encompassing luminosity of tathāgatagarbha—is deemed the definitive meaning of the *Web of Magical Illusion*.

### ***Mandala of the Peaceful Deities***

There are five pairs of male and female main deities in the mandala, one at the center and four in the four directions of east, west, south, and north. They are called the mother and father of the Five Buddha Families. In addition, there are sixteen bodhisattvas, six Munis (the supreme nirmanakaya buddhas for beings in each of the six realms), four pairs of wrathful gate keepers plus Buddha Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri, a total of forty-two deities.

#### ***1. Buddha Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri***

Samantabhadra, the primordial Father Buddha, represents the all-encompassing luminosity of tathāgatagarbha while Samantabhadri, the primordial Mother Buddha, represents emptiness of tathāgatagarbha. The union of Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri is the essence of all mandalas. Just like gold ornaments come in many varieties, but all are still made of gold. The nature of peaceful and wrathful appearances is the nature of mind—emptiness and luminosity—embodied as Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri. Everything in the mandala is their manifestations, so they do not appear singly. They can be visualized at the heart of the main deities.

#### ***2. The Five Tathagatas***

First of all, the aggregate of consciousness (of eyes, ears, nose, alaya, and so forth) is a key constituent element of a person's self, belonging to the mental aspect. When the aggregate of consciousness is pure, it manifests as Buddha

Vairocana. Buddha Vairocana, his consort, and the mandala they dwell in are blue in color, representing the Buddha's mind or wisdom.

As *tathāgatagarbha* is just a general term, it can be separated into five Buddha wisdoms. The essence of Vairocana is the wisdom of suchness (*tathata-jnana*).

Buddha Vairocana's consort is named Dhatvishvari or White Tara, who represents the purity of the element of space. Upon attaining buddhahood, the inherent nature of space is Dhatvishvari.

The color of the deities is not symbolic but something that can actually be seen. While in the bardo state or achieving advanced realization in the practice of *tögal*, the color of Buddha Vairocana and his consort that one can see at the very end is blue. This is true for the color of all other deities.

When Buddha Vairocana and his consort appear in the bardo state, very bright laser-like blue rays emanate from their heart. On top of each ray, there appears a light dot in the shape of an over-turned bowl with dim white light around it; the white light represents the light of the god realm.

There are always two different kinds of light accompanying the appearance of a deity. This discussion here will not deal with every individual deity, but we should know that the bright light which is the same color as the deity represents the radiance of the Buddha's compassion and wisdom; it is there to guide us. At that point, we must not be afraid but instead pray to the deity. However, because sentient beings have heavy karmic obscurations, most people will be terrified of the bright light. Although there is no reason to be afraid, they just don't want to see it and will seek desperately to hide from it; some may even pass out from fright. As the habitual tendency to remain in *samsara* is very strong in the *alaya* consciousness, they will feel jubilant on seeing the dim light and rush towards it, thereby

taking rebirth in one of the six realms. Thus begins the next cycle of life.

At this point, a diligent practitioner can recognize the blue light as the appearance of the nature of mind, the radiance of Buddha Vairocana's wisdom and compassion. Additionally, with the help of sincere prayer, the enlightened will be able to abide in this state, then dissolve into the heart of the Buddha in an instance and attain buddhahood at last. Such is the way to enlightenment in the bardo state.

We should know that this blue-colored Buddha is in fact our six or eight consciousnesses, nothing else. His primordial nature is *tathāgatagarbha*. Buddha Vairocana represents a phenomenon that is emanated from and inseparable with *tathāgatagarbha*.

The second is Buddha Akshobhya in the east. In Sanskrit, *akshobhya* means "Immovable One." He is the manifestation of the purified aggregate of form or matter, representing the Buddha's mirror-like awareness (*adarsa-jnana*).

Buddha Akshobhya holds a vajra in his right hand and a bell in his left hand. Both father and mother deities along with their mandala appear in white, representing the Buddha's body because the aggregate of matter is the key element that constitutes the physical body.

The consort of Buddha Akshobhya is *Buddhalochana*, the Lotus-eyed One. She manifests the purity of the element of earth, the solid matter such as stones or metals.

The third, in the south, is Buddha Ratnasambhava who manifests the purity of the aggregate of feeling or sensation and represents the Buddha's awareness of sameness (*samata-jnana*). His consort is Mamaki who manifests the purity of the element of water. Ratnasambhava with his consort and their mandala appear in yellow, representing the Buddha's merit.

The fourth, in the west, is Buddha Amitabha who manifests the purity of the aggregate of perception and represents

the Buddha's investigative awareness (*pratyaveksana-jnana*). Amitabha's consort is Pandaravasini who manifests the purity of the element of fire. Amitabha, his consort, and their mandala appear in red, representing the Buddha's speech.

The last is Amoghasiddhi in the north. He manifests the purity of the aggregate of mental formations and is associated with the wisdom of accomplishing activities (*kṛty-anuṣṭhāna-jnana*). His consort is Samayatara who manifests the purity of the element of wind, i.e., the external wind and man's subtle energy. Amoghasiddhi, his consort, and their mandala appear in green, representing the Buddha's activities.

Terms such as "object and perceiving an object" or "the cognized object and the cognizing subject" are often mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures. All sense organs (such as eyes) and sense consciousnesses (such as eye consciousness) are that which can perceive an object or that which cognize. All external phenomena like forms and sounds are deemed object or that which is to be cognized. For example, what the eyes see is object or that which is to be cognized; the eye consciousness is the cognizing subject or that which perceives an object.

The inherent nature of all external objects is represented by the Mother Buddha and that of all the internal cognizing subjects is the Father Buddha. The Five Tathagatas are the manifestations of five purified aggregates; their consorts, the Five Mother Buddhas, are the manifestations of five purified elements. The origin of all the deities is tathāgatagarbha.

### 3. The Sixteen Great Bodhisattvas

So far, our discussion is just a general summary without more detailed classifications. For instance, the aggregate of consciousness actually includes the eye, ear, nose, and tongue consciousnesses. What follows is a further explanation of the

manifestations of these four after they are purified.

Kshitigarbha manifests the purity of eye consciousness; Vajrapani manifests the purity of ear consciousness; Akashagarbha manifests the purity of nose consciousness; and Avalokiteshvara manifests the purity of tongue consciousness. These four are called the Four Inner Offering Bodhisattvas.

Goddess of Joy manifests the purity of form, the object of eye consciousness; Goddess of Garlands manifests the purity of sound; Goddess of Song manifests the purity of smell (here Goddess of Garlands and Goddess of Song seem to be in the wrong order, but they are represented this way for a reason); and Goddess of Dance manifests the purity of taste.

What follows are the four sense organs. The eyes can see because of a special structure in the eyeball; the ears have a different structure, so they are unable to see form or matter of any kind. Maitreya manifests the purity of eyes; Sarvanivaranavishkambhin manifests the purity of ears; Samantabhadra manifests the purity of nose; and Manjushri manifests the purity of tongue. These are the Four Outer Offering Bodhisattvas. The previous four are deemed inner bodhisattvas because they manifest the internal consciousness while the outer bodhisattvas manifest the external matter.

The objects of the respective four outer bodhisattvas are to be differentiated according to time (both sutra and tantra acknowledge the point that the Buddha's eyes can see through past and future). Goddess of Incense manifests the purity of the past, which is the object of eyes; Goddess of Flower manifests the purity of the present; Goddess of Light manifests the purity of the future; and Goddess of Perfume manifests the purity of the indeterminate time, which is the object of ears.

The eight inner and outer bodhisattvas and their consorts make up the sixteen great bodhisattvas.

#### 4. Six Munis

These are the six supreme teachers for beings of the six realms. Sutra only professes one teacher—Buddha Sakyamuni; while tantra, particularly in the tantra of the Nyingma school, mentions six teachers. The first supreme teacher, Indra Kaushika, is for the god realm. He manifests the purity of conceit. To deliver celestial beings, he holds a musical instrument, a pipa, because gods enjoy this kind of sensual pleasure.

Why does the teacher for the god realm manifest when conceit is purified? As is normally the case for ordinary people when they seem to stand out in a group, they become proud. Beings in the god realm, compared to other sentient beings, are special in terms of their physical form, surroundings, life span, and so forth. Hence, their pride is relatively more serious.

The second supreme teacher, Vemachitra, is for the asura realm. He manifests the purity of jealousy. Asuras have very strong jealousy. They do not accept their inferior standing to the gods, given their similar life span, surroundings, and enjoyment of pleasures, so they fight with the gods constantly. Vemachitra holds a sword in the right hand and an armor in the left because asuras like battles and weapons.

Here we should learn the meaning of the saying “to be pure without being purified.” This is quite an important idea in Vajrayana Buddhism. For example, the view of Theravada or Sutrayana is that defilement must be eradicated in order to attain the pure state. Vajrayana, on the other hand, says that before attaining realization, defilement is impure phenomenon; once realization is attained, defilement no longer needs to be eliminated. It is not because defilement is purified due to the attainment of realization, but intrinsically defilement is already pure. There is really nothing to be eliminated as all phenomena

are inherently pure. This is what the saying means.

Actually, this is the view of Ch’an Buddhism as well. In *The Bloodstream Sutra*, Bodhidharma makes the same point, “One who sees the nature of mind is a buddha; one who does not see the nature of mind is a sentient being.”

However, we must not think that the elimination of defilement is not required in Vajrayana, that greed and anger are tolerated. Some Vajrayana practitioners who have a particularly serious affliction may be allowed to undertake even the white skeleton visualization practice, not to mention other practices, when all available methods fail or if only this meditation is effective enough to counter the affliction. Nonetheless, this practice is borrowed from other traditions, not Vajrayana’s own practice.

The supreme teacher for the god realm manifests the purity of conceit without its obliteration. The supreme teacher for the asura realm manifests the purity of jealousy without its obliteration.

The third supreme teacher, Buddha Sakyamuni, is for the human realm. Among the six mental poisons, desire or insatiable greed is the most serious for humans. Therefore, the supreme teacher for humans manifests the purity of desire without obliterating it.

Of course, in the enlightened state, there is no distinction between buddhas and bodhisattvas. On the surface, however, the ten male and female Buddhas of the Forty-two Peaceful Deities appear sitting in full lotus position, signifying their ultimate enlightenment; whereas bodhisattvas, sitting in half lotus position, denote less than perfect attainment. Normally, Buddha Sakyamuni appears in a sitting position, but here the six Munis are standing. It means the six supreme teachers are actually the ones who endeavor to free sentient beings in the six realms, which leave them no time to sit down.

The fourth supreme teacher is for the animal realm. He manifests the purity of ignorance without obliterating it. Because animals are deluded, the teacher holds a scripture in his hands, which signifies rooting out ignorance with wisdom.

The fifth supreme teacher is for the realm of hungry ghosts. He manifests the purity of selfishness (unwillingness to give) without obliterating it. He holds a container of jewels, which signifies the elimination of hunger and thirst for the hungry ghosts.

The sixth supreme teacher is for the hell realm. He manifests the purity of aversion without obliterating it. He holds fire in the right hand and water in the left hand, which symbolizes dispelling cold and heat in the hell realm, respectively.

### *5. The Eight Wrathful Gatekeepers*

Although there are eight wrathful deities in the mandala of the peaceful deities, it is still named as such because the majority of the deities are peaceful ones.

But why are the wrathful deities here? In Vajrayana, the most complete mandala is called the mandala of three assemblages. Here, “assemblage” means people gathering in one place and sitting together. The first assemblage is the male and female buddhas of the Five Buddha Families who manifest the purity of five skandhas without obliterating them. The second assemblage is the sixteen male and female great bodhisattvas who manifest the purity of eye, ear, nose, tongue, their respective objects and consciousness without their obliteration. The third assemblage is the four pairs of male and female wrathful gatekeepers that manifest the purity of body, touch, body consciousness, and external condition without obliterating them.

These eight wrathful deities guard the east, west, south, and north gates of the mandala. The word “wrathful” describes the fierce ability to destroy attachment, which is different from its worldly definition. The wrathful manifestations symbolize crushing attachment with fierce anger.

In the teachings, Vajrayana sometimes uses the phrase “to be pure without being purified” and other times “to eradicate all defilements (in order to be pure).” Any eradication, if done, is only superficial. “To be pure without being purified” is what Vajrayana truly means. We must not misunderstand this.

The first pair of the wrathful deities, guarding the east gate of the mandala, is Achala and his consort Ankusha (Iron Hook). Achala holds a wooden stick decorated with a man’s head on the top, which symbolizes overwhelming the Lord of Death, one of the four maras—the Lord of Death brings no death as he is already enlightened without being purified.

The consorts of the four wrathful gatekeepers are Ankusha (Iron Hook), Pasha (the Noose), Shrinkhala (Iron Chain), and Ghanta (the Bell), who represent loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity (the Four Immeasurables) as well as giving, kind words, benefiting action, and working together (the Four Dharmas of Attraction), respectively. Hook, noose, chain, and bell all signify never forsaking sentient beings, taking sentient beings into their care.

The pair guarding the south gate is Yamantaka and his consort Pasha. Like Achala, Yamantaka holds a wooden stick with a double vajra on the top, which symbolizes overwhelming the mara of the sons of the gods, or overwhelming the mara without having to eliminate it. Pasha holds a noose, the same as the rope tied around the neck of a cow or a horse, which represents compassion and kind words.

The pair guarding the west gate is Hayagriva and his consort Shrinkhala. Hayagriva holds an iron chain, which



symbolizes overwhelming the mara of the destructive emotions. The iron chain held by Shrinkhala represents empathetic joy and benefiting action.

The pair guarding the north gate is Amritakundali and his consort Ghanta. Amritakundali holds a wooden stick with a double vajra on the top, which symbolizes overwhelming the mara of the aggregates or overwhelming the aggregates without obliterating them. Ghanta holds a bell which represents equanimity and working together with sentient beings.

We should know that the body, as a sense base, denotes the various parts of the body that can sense pain, pleasure, softness, hardness, and so forth. Hair and nails do not have any sensation of their own, so are not counted as part of the sense base.

The body, the objects it comes into contact with, and body consciousness combine to generate an ability to sense the different conditions of external objects, whether they are coarse, smooth, or something else. This particular sensation is called “touch” in *Abhidharmakosa-sastra*.

The body, external objects, body consciousness, and touch are represented by the four wrathful male deities. Amritakundali manifests the purity of touch; Hayagriva manifests the purity of body; Achala the purity of external objects; and Yamantaka the purity of body consciousness.

Why do the wrathful deities manifest? Sentient beings vary greatly in terms of their disposition and capacity. From the standpoint of freeing sentient beings by skillful means, some may be saved with peaceful means, which is what Buddha Sakyamuni did by turning the wheel of the Dharma three times; others require stronger measures. Some beings who accumulated great merit in their previous lives but lacked bodhicitta and proper dedication and generated evil vows become demons in their next lives, more powerful than regular gods and ghosts. To save these beings, more ferocious means must be used, hence

the wrathful manifestations.

In general, if two people (with the same credentials in terms of taking empowerment and keeping their vows pure) undertake the generation stage practice at the same time—one chooses the practice of the wrathful deity, the other the peaceful deity—the one who meditates on the peaceful yidam may encounter some obstacles. This is not a result of the practice, since the obstacles are already there, but because peaceful deities are somewhat limited in their ability to remove obstacles. The one who meditates on the wrathful yidam will achieve faster results and encounter less obstacles, because wrathful deities are particularly adept at overcoming hindrances. This is the advantage of the wrathful deities. If a generation stage practice lasts seven or eight days, the first five or six days should be set aside for the peaceful yidam practice and the last day for the wrathful yidam.

In the early days, Vajrayana was kept very secret in India. It remained so when it was first brought to Tibet, revealed only to its practitioners. The reason for such secrecy was that most people at the time could not comprehend the view of Vajrayana. As people gradually came to realize there is nothing about Vajrayana that is bad, just some skillful means that the Buddha used to help deliver sentient beings, they became receptive to it. Nowadays, with the help of technology, all kinds of tantric images are being distributed everywhere, but no one really understands Vajrayana except a handful of people.

The wrathful deities are presented as ferocious and fearsome, but this ferocity is not aimed at sentient beings but at negative emotions and attachment; it is not to subdue anything other than defilement. On the surface, it signifies their ability to save those sentient beings that the peaceful deities cannot help, namely, the demons that harm other beings.

Actually, they represent a different form of compassion and wisdom, like a different kind of language or symbol, with every

utterance signifying the Buddha's compassion and wisdom. We should look at the profound inner meaning of the wrathful deities, not how they are depicted. Just as when someone uses the finger to point out the moon to you, you should look at the moon, not the finger.

As Vajrayana practitioners, we should understand the meaning behind every detail of the deity's appearance.

a) Normally, light emanates from behind the buddhas and bodhisattvas, which looks comforting and inspires faith. But coming from behind the wrathful deities is not light but fire which represents realization of emptiness—to destroy cyclic existence in the three realms and burn afflictions and suffering of sentient beings in the six realms with realization of emptiness.

b) The wrathful deities's hair is upright, symbolizing all impure phenomena of samsara are inseparable from nirvana or the mandala of the buddhas; all are immaculate in dharmadhatu.

c) The five human skulls on the head of the wrathful deities have threefold meaning: first, like the five-Buddha crown on the head of the peaceful deities, they signify the Five Tathagatas; second, they signify the purity of the five poisons without obliterating them; third, they represent the five wisdoms of the Five Tathagatas.

Why are the skulls dry? As realization of emptiness is like a raging fire that burns everything in sight, the dry skulls represent the heat or the energy of such realization that the wrathful deities have achieved.

d) Their three eyes symbolize seeing the past, present, and future.

e) The elephant-skin upper garment represents the ten powers of a buddha. The elephant has a huge and heavy body, but its intellect is small by comparison. The garment represents the purity of ignorance without its obliteration, or

the destruction of ignorance with the ten powers.

f) The tiger-skin skirt represents the purity of aversion without its obliteration.

g) Not wearing anything else signifies the unobstructed tathāgatagarbha or the nature of mind.

The dharma vessels held in the hands of the deities do not necessarily remain unchanged all the time. Rather, they may vary depending on the practice undertaken at the time. Our discussion here is based on a book, not the compilation of all the different descriptions given in the tantras. Different tantras may present different dharma vessels that the deities hold, but clear explanations are available in the respective tantras. They are not contradictory because as a whole the deities manifest the purity of all of one's body and mind. Although each part of the body or mind corresponds to the manifestation of a particular deity, it should not be a problem either if some of the deities are switched because all deities are of the same nature; they are all the mandala of the buddhas.

The Five Tathagatas and their consorts plus sixteen great bodhisattvas, six Munis, eight wrathful gatekeepers, Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri make up the forty-two peaceful deities.

Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri, unlike the other forty deities, are without any ornaments or clothing as they represent the dharmakaya which is devoid of marks. Samantabhadra signifies luminosity of tathāgatagarbha and Samantabhadri its emptiness. The other forty deities represent the various forms of luminosity and emptiness. Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri embody the essence of all forty deities.

We should know that our bodies already possess the forty-two peaceful yidams. It's just that we cannot see it right now.

### *Mandala of the Wrathful Deities*

All the peaceful deities look just as kind and dignified as the buddhas and bodhisattvas in sutra. That makes them easily acceptable as they fit in with the image most people expect the buddhas and bodhisattvas to have. However, it is different with the wrathful deities. Without knowing the symbolic meaning behind each look, the wrathful deities are apt to cause misunderstanding, confusion, even wrong views, and subsequently malicious comments.

The key point here is to know that the deities, either peaceful or wrathful looking, are all just different manifestations for the deliverance of sentient beings—different forms but same essence.

If the wrathful deities are not deemed buddhas and bodhisattvas, neither should the peaceful deities. If the peaceful deities are acknowledged as buddhas and bodhisattvas, so should the wrathful deities. As they are of the same essence, all are manifestations of the buddha's wisdom.

In the center of the mandala is Chemchok Heruka, who is the main yidam of the whole mandala. Heruka means “blood drinking” in Sanskrit. This is the meaning of all the herukas mentioned in the following. Many herukas and their consorts are seen holding in one hand a kapala filled with blood. One should not suppose that a real human skull containing blood is there for one to drink. These are in fact manifestations of the buddha's omniscient wisdom, only that they appear outwardly as such.

The reason is tantra maintains the color red signifies sentient beings' desire for samsara. So drinking blood means downing or eliminating this desire.

Chemchok Heruka and his consort are in fact the wrathful aspect of Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri in the peaceful mandala, but they are not part of the fifty-eight wrathful deities.

Chemchok Heruka represents the luminous aspect of

tathāgatagarbha. All that appear in the mandala are his varied manifestations, but in reality they are never separate from Chemchok Heruka himself. He is like pure gold while other herukas are gold jewelry—different forms, same essence. His consort Krodhishvari represents the void aspect of tathāgatagarbha. All mandalas, inseparable from dharmadhatu or emptiness, are different representations of emptiness.

The two words *heruka* and *krodhishvari* are not Tibetan but Sanskrit; *krodhi* means wrathful, *shvari* means dakini/goddess. All the following herukas and krodhishvaris are the various manifestations of Heruka and his consort.

First, let us understand in general what Heruka's appearance, garments, and adornments represent.

a) Many herukas have wings which represent wisdom and skillful means. Flying objects, whether an airplane or any kind of bird, almost always have a pair of wings. As long as one of the wings is missing, flying is not possible. By the same token, for buddhahood to be attained, the wisdom to realize the void nature of all phenomena and the skillful means of compassion must be on hand. That is, only the union of wisdom and skillful means can lead one to buddhahood. Bodhicitta, great compassion, and the five paramitas besides the paramita of wisdom are all considered skillful means. In the absence of either wisdom or skillful means, buddhahood cannot be attained.

b) Heruka has three faces representing the buddha's body, speech, and mind, respectively—the white face on the right stands for the buddha's body, the one in the middle the buddha's mind, and the red on the left the buddha's speech.

c) The six arms represent the six paramitas. Once buddhahood is attained, it is the path of no more learning, hence the six paramitas need not be practiced any longer; however, the buddhas must have perfected all the six paramitas

before reaching buddhahood.

d) The four feet represent the four ways of gathering disciples. Even though the hands and feet of the wrathful deities have other meanings as well, it is generally acceptable to regard them as such.

e) Heruka wears a garland of fifty-one freshly severed human heads, representing fifty-one mental factors purified without having to obliterate them. In *Abhidharma*, mental factors are included in the aggregate of mental formations; these factors are our various thoughts of which fifty-one are the major ones. Everyone has thousands of thoughts, but these fifty-one thoughts come up most often for ordinary people and they are also the primary causes for cyclic existence. The garland of human heads manifests the purity of the fifty-one mental factors without obliterating them, which means the fifty-one mental factors need not be forsaken. Once enlightenment is achieved, they are the transcendent wisdom that adorns us.

The view of Theravada is that these mental factors are defiled phenomena of which some are afflictions and some are non-virtues. All defiled things are hindrances to liberation. One must eliminate defiled mental factors with realization of not-self, and subsequently attain arhatship.

The view of sutra is first, these mental factors should be eliminated through realization of not-self of person and of phenomena; second, having attained realization of emptiness and aroused bodhicitta, mental factors need not be eradicated as Theravada suggests; instead, they can be transformed into the path of liberation.

Vajrayana, on the other hand, thinks that mental factors neither need be eliminated nor transformed as nothing is really there in the first place. Upon reaching enlightenment, we realize all are inherently pure, already the primordial wisdom itself.

f) Under Heruka's left and right foot each lies a person.

What does it mean? In general, the four feet represent the four ways of gathering disciples, while the left foot symbolizes wisdom and the right foot skillful means. The man lying under the right foot represents nihilism and attachment to mind. In *The Ornament of Clear Realization*, attachment to external objects and to the inner mind is explained. Why is nihilism trampled under the right foot? It is because the so-called nihilism simply defines emptiness as nothingness. The antidote to nihilism is skillful means which itself is a phenomenon. As phenomenon and nihilistic views are contradictory, nihilism cannot stand if extant phenomenon is acknowledged. Stamping a man under the right foot is to suppress nihilism with skillful means.

The woman under the left foot represents eternalism and attachment to external objects to which the antidote is realization of emptiness. Stamping a woman under the left foot is to subdue eternalism and attachment to external objects with wisdom.

Therefore, the image does not depict how the wrathful deity, without compassion, mercilessly tramples sentient beings to death. In fact, even sutra acknowledges the use of skillful means to stifle nihilism and attachment to mind, and wisdom to subdue eternalism and attachment to external objects. They are just expressed differently.

g) The four fangs represent extinguishing the four modes of birth, namely birth from moisture, egg, womb, and spontaneous birth.

h) The snake ornaments on the body—in white, green, or other colors—manifest the purity of aversion, one of the three poisons, without having to eradicate it. The snake is considered an animal of extreme aversion. Based on the view of tantra, aversion need not be abolished as taught in Theravada, nor transformed according to sutra, as it is already the pure wisdom of the buddha.

i) The leopard-skin skirt worn by Heruka's consort represents great bliss which is actually great clear light—luminosity of tathāgatagarbha. It also represents the unobstructed activity of delivering sentient beings.

j) Heruka holds a five-pronged vajra which symbolizes the five wisdoms.

k) Khatvanga, a transliteration of the Sanskrit word, has three prongs on the top and three human heads on the middle prong. The number “three” here symbolizes the purity of the three poisons without having to abolish them.

l) The skull-cup represents wisdom and great bliss without marks.

m) Deities in the mandala appear with various shapes of head; generally, they represent the many forms of emanations to free sentient beings from samsara.

### 1. *The Five Wrathful Herukas*

The first is Buddhaheruka whose counterpart in the peaceful mandala is Vairochana. Buddhaheruka, being the head of the Five Buddha Families, is positioned in front of Chemchok Heruka at the center of the mandala.

We can also visualize based on how the thangka is painted. The center is Chemchok Heruka surrounded by five herukas and their consorts, which correspond to the Five Buddha Families in the peaceful mandala—Buddhaheruka is in front of Chemchok Heruka. At the back are Vajraheruka and Vajrarodhishvari of the east, the wrathful Akshobhya and his consort. Ratnaheruka and Ratnarodhishvari of the south are the wrathful Ratnasambhava and his consort; in Sanskrit, ratna means jewel. Padmaheruka and Padmakrodhishvari at the west of the mandala are the wrathful Amitabha and his consort. The peaceful and wrathful versions, like two faces of a buddha, or

two facial expressions of being angry and not being angry, are in fact one entity. Lastly, in the north are Karmaheruka and Karmakrodhishvari. As Karmaheruka represents the activity of the buddha, he appears in green, the same as Amoghasiddhi in the peaceful mandala.

Except Chemchok Heruka and his consort who are not included in the fifty-eight wrathful deities, the other five herukas and their consorts are in fact the Five Tathagatas in the peaceful mandala.

### 2. *The Eight Wrathful Females*

They are related to the twelve ayatanas (sense bases) discussed in both Theravada's *Abhidharma-kosa* and Mahayana *Abhidharma*. One of the sense bases is mind. Mind can be categorized into eight consciousnesses—eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, mental consciousness, manas, and alaya consciousness. The eight females represent the wrathful manifestations of the eight consciousnesses when purified, also the nature of the eight consciousnesses. In the peaceful mandala, the first few consciousnesses manifest as the inner bodhisattvas.

These eight wrathful females not only look intimidating, the objects they hold in their hands are also quite frightening. But once we know the inner meaning behind the menacing appearances, we will actually feel joy, not fear.

The first is Gauri-ma who represents the purity of eye consciousness. She holds in her right hand a wooden stick with a piece of human skin attached on the top, which represents the wisdom of non-discrimination because human skin no longer has any sense or spirit after a person dies. A skull-cup filled with blood is held in her left hand, symbolizing the purity of desire

for samsara without obliterating it.

The second is Chaurimatrika representing the purity, also the essence, of ear consciousness. The bow and arrow held in her hands symbolize the union of wisdom and skillful means.

The third is Pramoha representing the purity of nose consciousness. She holds a makara in her hand. *Makara* is a Sanskrit word for an ancient animal that appears quite often in Buddhist literature, an animal that we won't find any description or information in the animal database today. Makara is a very powerful sea-creature that never lets its preys escape; it represents not falling into the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism, or samsara and nirvana, but abiding in the freedom from the two extremes. Ordinary people are trapped in samsara, whereas arhats attain liberation but fall into nirvana. Mahayana liberation avoids the two extremes of samsara and nirvana. The dharma vessel held in Pramoha's hand also symbolizes guiding sentient beings not to fall into the two extremes.

The fourth is Vetali who represents the purity of tongue consciousness. She holds a vajra in her right hand, which symbolizes destroying all discursive thoughts and obscurations.

The fifth is Pukkasi who represents the purity of body consciousness. She holds in her hand the intestines of a child. The child symbolizes ordinary people as ordinary sentient beings are as ignorant and silly as children, who cannot contemplate on their own, let alone attain enlightenment. Eating the intestines of a child means not to abandon sentient beings out of compassion, also to lead them to the path of liberation. Naturally, the buddhas cannot possibly be holding real intestines in their hands.

The sixth is Ghasmari who represents the purity of manas—self-grasping. She also holds a vajra in her hand, which basically denotes the same as that mentioned previously.

The seventh is Chandali who represents the purity of

mind consciousness. She holds a heart in her right hand and a snare made with human intestines in her left hand. The heart symbolizes the wrong view; taking the heart out from a dead body symbolizes eradicating the wrong views of sentient beings.

The eighth is Shmashani who represents the purity of alaya consciousness. What she holds in her hands is even more terrifying—a human head in her right hand and a headless body in her left hand. To the uninitiated, such a sight can be easily misunderstood. Vajrayana followers must learn the meaning behind these images. Otherwise, even those who have faith in the Vajrayana teachings and have also received empowerment may still be a little puzzled upon seeing these. The human head symbolizes attachment to self. Holding the cut-off head in the right hand represents abolishing all attachment to self. The headless body in the left hand represents the wisdom of not-self and no thought, as a body with no head is just a human frame without any consciousness or thought.

The normal order of the eight consciousnesses should be the body consciousness followed by the sixth mind consciousness, then manas (self-consciousness), and finally alaya consciousness. But it is a little different here.

The order of the deities is not always fixed. In some tantras, it begins with alaya consciousness. That makes Gauri-ma the alaya consciousness and Chaurimatrika the manas. This arrangement is based on the order in which the eight consciousnesses arise. Since alaya consciousness is the basis of mind and all mental factors, the other seven consciousnesses can only evolve after the arising of alaya consciousness.

Here, the order is based on the level of consciousness of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, from the gross to the more subtle, with alaya consciousness being the subtlest.

It is not important how the order is arranged. But we should not insist that Gauri-ma must represent eye consciousness

and nothing else. Because all the deities are actually of one essence, the purity of any one of the eight consciousnesses or one of the aggregates, such as the aggregate of form, can be represented by Gauri-ma as well as by Chaurimatrika. It is not at all inconsistent.

On the surface, it appears that the wrathful mandala is filled with terror. But behind the fierce countenance, there lies tremendous wisdom and compassion; there is no eroticism, nor is there any violence or aversion.

When we die or when practicing *tögal*, these deities will appear to us. If at that time, we failed to recognize them as the mandala of the buddhas or, more importantly, the true nature of our own mind, but see them as demons instead, we would lose consciousness from fear and subsequently take rebirth in the lower realms. It is therefore crucial to know these wrathful mandalas.

### 3. *The Eight Tramen*

The eight tramen represent the purified sense objects of the eight consciousnesses.

For example, the things our eyes can see are the objects of the eye consciousness, referred to in Buddhist terminology as form or matter; the sound we can hear is the object of the ear consciousness and so on.

The eight tramen are animal-headed deities of which four are with fangs and four with wings. The ones with fangs are the lion, tiger, vixen, and wolf; the ones with wings are the vulture, black-necked crane, raven, and owl.

The first is Simhamukha (lion-faced dakini) who holds a dead body in her hand. She is the sense object of the eye consciousness, the visible form as specified in the twelve sense bases or the eighteen elements (*dhatus*). That is, she manifests the

purity of all that which come in forms and colors to our eyes. In other words, Simhamukha represents the true nature or the purity of matter. It also means all the things that we normally see are only illusions created on our own account. We cannot see what they really are due to our defilement and cognitive hindrances. The original face of matter is the lion-faced dakini herself.

There cannot be any real animal and corpse in the manifestation of buddha's wisdom and in the state of buddhahood; they are only symbolic. As described in sutra, every one of the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of the buddha has its specific cause and condition, reference, and representation. They are naturally present, not by means of visualization; each one signifies one of the buddha's merits. The lion-face represents suppressing fearlessly the attachment to form. The corpse in the hand represents no thought, not-self, and no attachment to self.

The second is Vyaghrimukha (tiger-headed) who manifests the purity of sound heard by the ear consciousness. Not holding any dharma vessel in her hands, she only makes a cross sign with her hands to signify equality, that is, to subdue all inequality with the mudra of equality. All phenomena seen by ordinary beings are inequitable and biased. The luminous and empty state of the buddha is one of absolute equality. The tiger-head represents fearlessness toward the attachment to sound and unbounded courage.

The third is Srigalamukha (vixen-headed) who manifests the purity of smell, the object of nose consciousness. She holds a knife in her hand, which represents the obliteration of wrong views. In general, the knife or axe held by the wrathful deities is not to be used on any sentient beings but on afflictions of greed, aversion, ignorance, attachment, etc. The vixen-head symbolizes not fearing the attachment to pleasant smell and

having skillful means.

The fourth is Shvanamukha (wolf-headed) who manifests the purity of taste, the object of tongue consciousness. The object that her eyes are staring at, her hands are holding, and her mouth is biting is again a corpse, which represents destroying attachment to self and attaining realization of not-self. Staring means discerning samsara and nirvana are one and the same. The wolf-head symbolizes not fearing the attachment to taste and succeeding in activities.

The fifth is Gridhamukha (vulture-headed) who manifests the purity of touch, the sense object of body consciousness, or the intrinsic nature of touch. Her head appears like that of a vulture which feeds on corpses in a charnel ground. She holds in her hand a section of human intestines representing attachment or the three poisons. Eating the intestines means taking sentient beings' attachment to a state absent of conceptual attributes, or eliminating greed, aversion, and delusion—the three poisons are purified without being obliterated.

The sixth is Kangkamuhka (crane-headed) who carries a corpse on her shoulder. There are many explanations for the Sanskrit word *kanka*, of which the more accurate one is that it is a bird feeding on corpses in the charnel ground in India; its scientific name is black-necked crane. Kangkamuhka manifests the purity of attachment to self, the object of manas; she is the essence of attachment to self.

The seventh is Kakamukha (raven-faced), as *kaka* in Sanskrit means raven. Holding a sword in her hand, she manifests the intrinsic nature or the purity of the object of mental consciousness, representing the elimination of defilement—defilement purified without being obliterated.

The eighth is Ulumukha (owl-headed) who holds a dharma vessel with a vajra on one side and a hook on the other side, symbolizing the compassionate act to gather and never abandon

sentient beings. She is the essence of the object of alaya consciousness.

What is the object of alaya consciousness? According to Yogācāra, it is the entirety of the worlds of non-sentient objects and sentient beings, the reason being that although alaya consciousness does not have one particular object of its own, all the other seven consciousnesses are not separate from alaya consciousness; they are the different forms of alaya consciousness. Therefore, it can be said that the objects of the seven consciousnesses are also the object of the alaya consciousness. Ulumukha manifests the purity of the sentient world and the non-sentient world as a whole.

The four bird-faced deities all represent not falling into the two extremes, that is, samsara and nirvana are the same, wisdom and skillful means are inseparable.

#### 4. *The Four Female Gatekeepers*

Guarding the east gate is Ankusha (horse-faced), also called Iron Hook, who holds an iron hook in the right hand, representing the compassion to guide samsara to nirvana. At the south gate is Pasha (sow-faced) who holds a noose in her right hand, representing the perfect combination of wrong views and wisdom into one. Guarding the west gate is Shrinkhala (lion-faced), also called Iron Chain, who holds an iron chain in her right hand, representing the defeat of ignorance. Ghanta (snake-faced), guarding the north gate, holds a vajra bell in the right hand, representing the five poisons purified as the wisdom of the buddha; a skull-cup filled with fresh blood is held in her left hand, representing the union of samsara and nirvana.

#### 5. *The Twenty-eight Ishvaris*

Each heruka in the east, west, south, and north is



surrounded by six yoginis, and a female outer-gate keeper is in each of the four directions for a total of twenty-eight ishvaris.

In the east, the first yogini is the bovine-faced yogini who manifests the purity of the essence of eye, the sense organ. The second is the snake-faced yogini who manifests the purity of the essence of ear; a lotus flower is held in her hand. The third is the leopard-faced yogini who, holding a dharma vessel with three sharp points that represents the elimination of the three poisons, manifests the purity of the essence of nose. The fourth is the weasel-faced yogini who, holding a dharma wheel, manifests the purity of the essence of tongue. In non-Buddhist tales, the dharma wheel is a weapon used by the gods in battle. Here, it represents destroying the source of samsara. The fifth is the Tibetan blue bear-faced yogini who manifests the purity of the essence of body. An arrow held in her hand represents extinguishing the source of birth, aging, sickness, and death, i.e., the body. The sixth, the bear-faced yogini, manifests the purity of the realm of phenomena (dharmadhatu), the object of mental consciousness. Here, dharmadhatu denotes only the object of the sixth consciousness, which is an abstract matter that can be contemplated, analyzed, and observed. She holds a long noose in her hand, representing the discontinuation of cyclic existence. The last one is the cuckoo-faced female gatekeeper of the east gate who manifests the purity of touch, one of the eighteen elements.

The main activity of these seven yoginis in the east relates to the activity of pacifying.

The first yogini in the south is the bat-faced yogini who manifests the purity of the element of sound. The small knife held in her hand represents cutting the root of samsara. Sound being one of the eighteen elements is the same as that of the twelve sense bases, only classified differently. The second is the makara-faced or sea-creature yogini. From the references

that I used, she is said to be the essence of mind, that is, the manifestation of the purity of mind (here, mind could mean either manas or mental consciousness as in the eight consciousnesses.) She holds a treasure vase which represents fulfilling the wishes of all sentient beings. The third is the scorpion-faced yogini who is the essence, or manifests the purity, of alaya consciousness. She holds a lotus in her hand, representing absolute immaculacy.

What follows are the nature of the five sense objects—form, sound, smell, etc.

The fourth of the seven yoginis in the south is the harrier-faced yogini who manifests the pure essence of form. She holds a vajra in her hand which represents helping sentient beings to realize the essence of dharmadhatu. The vajra, in Buddhist literature and in tantras particularly, usually represents oneness which is also what dharmadhatu denotes. The fifth is the vixen-faced yogini who manifests the purity of the essence of sound. A wooden stick held in her hand represents destroying all afflictions. The sixth is the tiger-faced yogini who manifests the purity of the essence of smell. Held in her hand is a skull-cup filled with blood which represents worldly desires. To drink up the blood means to vanquish all desires. The last one is the goat-faced female gatekeeper of the south gate who manifests the purity of the element of form. She holds a noose in her hand of which one end is tied with a vajra and the other end an iron hook, representing the act of immeasurable loving-kindness to receive and never forsake sentient beings.

The main activity of the seven yoginis in the south corresponds to the activity of enriching.

The first yogini in the west is the vulture-faced yogini who, being the object of tongue consciousness, manifests the purity of the essence of taste. A stick held in her hand represents destroying discriminating thoughts and desire. The second

is the horse-faced yogini who manifests the purity of the essence of touch. She holds a dead child's body, representing the elimination of all discriminating thoughts and desire. The third is the garuda-faced yogini who, being the object of mental consciousness, manifests the purity of the essence of the realm of phenomena. She holds a stick as well, which connotes the same meaning as the previous one.

Please note that later on there will be other manifestations of form, sound, smell, touch, and the like. The difference between those and the ones presented so far is that the aforementioned are manifestations of the "essence" of form, sound, smell, and so forth while the ensuing are manifestations of the "element" of sound, touch, etc. as defined in the eighteen elements (*dhatus*).

This concludes the description of manifestations of the purity of external objects. The next section will present manifestations of internal consciousness such as eye consciousness, ear consciousness, etc.

The fourth yogini in the west is the dog-faced yogini who, holding a vajra that represents destroying samsara, manifests the purity of eye consciousness. However, we should not equate eye consciousness with the dog-faced yogini. The ultimate reality of eye consciousness is luminous awareness. But between the luminous state of tathāgatagarbha and the defiled phenomena that we now see, there is a third world, a purified state represented by these manifestations. In this third world, the dog-faced yogini manifests the eye consciousness. All other deities should also be viewed as such.

The fifth yogini in the west, the hoopoe-faced yogini, manifests the purity of ear consciousness. She holds a bow and an arrow, representing wisdom and skillful means, respectively. The sixth is the doe-faced yogini who manifests the purity of nose consciousness. The treasure vase that she holds represents

fulfilling every wish of sentient beings. The last is the lion-faced yogini, who is also the female gatekeeper of the west gate; holding an iron chain in her hand, she manifests the purity of dharmadhatu.

The main activity of the seven yoginis in the west corresponds to the activity of magnetizing.

The four female gatekeepers in both the peaceful and wrathful mandalas all represent the four ways of gathering disciples and the Four Immeasurables.

The first yogini in the north is the wolf-faced yogini who manifests the purity of tongue consciousness. A flag held in her hand represents obliterating evil karma of sentient beings. The second is called the grass frog yogini. The Asiatic grass frog is a species that can live in an environment that is thirty degrees below zero. She manifests the purity of body consciousness. The lamp held in her hand represents dispelling ignorance of sentient beings with the light of wisdom. The third is the sow-faced yogini who manifests the purity of mind consciousness. The noose she holds is tied on both ends with a fang, which represents samsara being bound by dharmadhatu and disappearing into dharmadhatu, or samsara being really one and the same with dharmadhatu and nirvana.

The section above describes the manifestations of the purity of the six consciousnesses.

In the following, we shall return to the description of the manifestations of form, sound, smell, and so on, but not of their essence as previously described. The manifestations will be slightly different here as they are of the form, sound, smell, and so forth of the eighteen elements.

The fourth yogini in the north is the crow-faced yogini who manifests the purity of form element. The body of a dead child that she holds represents the essence of all phenomena being no thought, no conception, and no attachment. The fifth is the

elephant-faced yogini who manifests the purity of taste element (the sound element was mentioned earlier). She holds the body of a dead grown-up, which likewise represents notions like not-self and the pure state. The sixth is the snake-faced yogini who manifests the purity of smell element. She holds in her hand a snake noose—the body of a snake is the noose with a snake head on each end—that represents guiding aversion into dharmadhatu. It is said that among all the animals, the snake harbors the most serious tendency to aversion. The seventh is also the snake-faced yogini, also the north gatekeeper, who manifests the purity of heat or fire (one of the five elements). A double vajra held in her left hand and a bell in her right hand represent immeasurable equanimity.

The main activity of the seven yoginis in the north corresponds to the activity of subjugating.

The fifty-eight wrathful deities increase to sixty when Chemchok Heruka and his consort are added, but the pair are not counted as part of the fifty-eight deities. The forty-two peaceful deities plus the fifty-eight wrathful deities constitute the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities.

The configuration, colors, and style of this mandala are not dictated indiscreetly by any person, nor are they created by some artist at will. Rather, it is a reconstruction of what actually manifests from luminous dharmadhatu.

### ***Dispelling Doubts about the Mandala***

Why are there so many male and female deities? It is because in the world of relative truth, every object has its own luminosity and emptiness. Various forms of male and female deities manifest in order to represent this aspect of matter. The union of male and female deities signifies the inseparability of appearance and emptiness. That's all. There can never be any

sexual insinuation and violence in Vajrayana Buddhism.

I once saw part of a practice of a male and female yidam in union in *Qianlong Tripitaka*. Although it was only partial, I had no doubt it was an inner tantric practice, translated a long time ago. This also indicates that there are in fact lineages of this practice in Chinese Buddhism as well. Either way, the union of male and female deities is to represent the inseparable union of appearance and emptiness. There is no other meaning than this. And all female deities represent emptiness.

Nowadays, people who know Vajrayana only superficially often misunderstand the meaning of male and female deities in union. Furthermore, encouraged by those with ulterior motives, these people set out to heap slanders on, to belittle, Vajrayana. Such behavior is totally meaningless. It is at least understandable if one just doesn't want to know or to learn, but to malign Vajrayana Buddhism deliberately is going too far; from the point of view of cause and effect, it also engenders great evil karma. Actually, anyone who has done a bit of study of the theory of Vajrayana would know the union of male and female deities is not at all sex oriented.

In the old days, before starting a debate, even non-Buddhists would first study the works and thesis of the opponents to understand their points clearly, then try to disprove the opponents' propositions with more convincing logic. It is no longer the case today. Upon seeing certain images, people who don't really know the proper view of Vajrayana just go ahead with their own interpretation and follow with vicious attack for no good reason. This is not a real debate but outright slander. If these people have ulterior motives, perhaps by doing this they may get what they want. If however these people are Buddhists, it is certainly regrettable. This situation was anticipated by the buddhas and bodhisattvas long ago; therefore some aspects of Vajrayana have been kept secret as required

and not revealed casually to those without faith. Even if one compels such persons to learn Vajrayana, a proper process must be followed.

### ***The Classification of Mandala***

The mandala discussed here is the same mandala presented in the *Guhyaagarbha Tantra* and *Bardo Thodok*; its primary focus is the sambhogakaya. Although the teachers of the six realms are also included within, they are deemed the nirmanakaya, who in fact still embody the enlightened wisdom of the buddha, that is, the nirmanakaya in the state of buddhahood itself.

There are two kinds of sambhogakaya: the first is one's own object; the second is other's object that other sentient beings can see.

That which is one's own object means when one has eliminated all afflictions and attained buddhahood, a mandala manifests in this state, which no bodhisattvas or ordinary beings outside can see.

That which is other's object means a state that sentient beings in their respective worlds can also see. For example, when Buddha Sakyamuni appeared in this world and turned the wheel of Dharma, his disciples then and the Buddha himself obviously were different people, but they could see Buddha Sakyamuni in person. This is the case of being other's object. According to sutra, before attaining buddhahood, not even pure phenomena seen by the bodhisattvas of the eighth bhumi are deemed one's own object; they are still other's object.

On the other hand, the mandala seen in the intermediate state, after attaining buddhahood, during the practice of *tögal*, and other Vajrayana practices is deemed one's own object.

### ***The Position of Mandala***

When a person is alive, the peaceful deities are located at the heart position and the wrathful deities at the brain. The real buddha field is also the same with the peaceful one below the wrathful one. This arrangement remains when practicing *tögal* and in the intermediate state. As for the visualization practice of the generation stage and a more complete practice of the combined peaceful and wrathful mandala, we should still visualize the peaceful deities at the lower level and the wrathful deities at the upper level.

As for the heart position, it doesn't mean that all those deities are in our hearts. It is because the chakras are located on the top of one's head, at the throat, the heart, and so on, respectively, and the most critical among them is the one at the heart where the all-important seed for the manifestation of the buddha's mandala is stored. When the essence drops (*bindu*) in the heart chakra ripen and bring their power into play, the mandala of the buddhas will manifest. The central channel that penetrates the chakra actually represents emptiness of *tathāgatagarbha*. In the fifth bardo of dharmata (*Chönyi bardo*), the winds gradually enter into the *bindu* in the heart chakra, taking one's thoughts and consciousness along with it—all eight consciousnesses withdraw until finally they shrink into the central channel and merge with clear light. In an instant, all obscurations vanish and the inherently existing mandala of the buddhas naturally emanates.

Even though it is said literally in the *Guhyaagarbha Tantra* that the *tathāgatagarbha* is located at the heart position, the fact is it permeates all dharmadhatu and is not confined to one's heart. It is just the way we describe it, the way we visualize and meditate on it.

To say that wrathful deities are located at the crown does

not mean so many wrathful deities are being kept in the head. Actually, the appearance of wrathful deities in the head chakra is also a projection of the peaceful deities.

On the surface, it seems as if we are looking at a mandala of the buddhas that appears in the space before us. In fact, our eyes do not see it nor is there an external phenomenon in front of us; it is a phenomenon that is within the central channel, which can be seen even with our eyes closed.

It would be extremely unwise to explain, analyze, and judge Vajrayana solely based on its words. To properly explain Vajrayana, only the realized masters of Vajrayana have the authority and expertise. As they have received pith instructions from the lineage masters and gained realization of their own, explanations given by such teachers are not likely to go wrong.

### ***Mandala in the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma***

Only Vajrayana truly explains the intention of the third turning of the wheel of Dharma by the Buddha. A sutra from the third turning says this: “Suppose a painter paints the whole world—Mount Sumeru, the east continent Purvavideha, the south Jambudvipa, Aparagodaniya in the west, Uttarakuru the northern continent, and the rest of the twelve continents—on a piece of cloth the size of one billion world-systems or a great trichiliocosm. Then another person uses magic to shrink the painting down to a size that can fit into a sesame seed or a particle. From the outside, it looks no bigger than a sesame seed, but inside it contains the whole of the universe with Mount Sumera and the continents.” Likewise, it is never evident from the outside that the body of an ordinary person contains within it the wisdom of the buddha, but a person’s mind does in fact possess such wisdom. Sutra does not refer to it as the mandala of the buddhas, only as luminous awareness—the buddha’s

perfect merit. Tantra, however, points out explicitly which deities correspond to the five aggregates, the twelve sense bases, and the eighteen elements as well as how each deity constitutes the mandala.

### ***The Quantity of Deities in the Mandala***

As mentioned before, the mandala discussed here is based on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* and *Bardo Thodol*. There are other types of mandalas in Vajrayana that may have deities numbered in the hundreds, even thousands. But the foundation of all the tantras of Nyingmapa is the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*; in this, as in *Bardo Thodol*, the mandala has one hundred deities. Actually, no matter how many deities there are, they are all manifestations of the buddha’s wisdom.

These one hundred deities are not made to appear by some sort of practice but inherent in all of us. From the standpoint of all phenomena being inherently pure, the five aggregates, the twelve sense bases, and the eighteen elements may look defiled on the surface, but their essence in fact is always the mandala of the buddhas.

From the standpoint of appearance in relative truth, the impure body we have now can be transformed gradually into the pure mandala of the buddhas through the tantric practice of generation stage.

Whether they are inherently pure or purified through the elimination of defilement, the forty-two peaceful deities and the fifty-eight wrathful deities are really just our own five aggregates, the solid, liquid, and gaseous matter, the eight consciousnesses and their objects, etc. We do not see them because of our own defilement. Once we attain realization or gain stability in the generation stage practice, the mandala of the buddhas will appear to us.

### ***Distinction between Mandalas of Fully and Partially Revealed Truths***

There are two mandalas in the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. The first is the mandala of absolute truth and the second the mandala of relative truth or the partially revealed truth. Our discussion here is on the mandala of relative truth. The ultimate mandala, the one that reveals the whole truth, is the nature of all phenomena (the five aggregates, the twelve sense bases, the eighteen elements, the sentient and the non-sentient worlds, etc.)—the luminous awareness of tathāgatagarbha. But besides emptiness and luminosity, all things in the world also appear as impure phenomena and relatively pure phenomena.

The impure is the world we see, which is the illusory manifestation of clear light, created by tathāgatagarbha. The world is perceived as being impure because our minds are not pure, not because worldly things are inherently impure.

Impure phenomena can also be classified into six levels: the beings in the hell realm see the most impure karmic phenomena, the hungry ghosts see the next less impure level, then the animals, humans, asuras, and gods, respectively.

The mandala just discussed is one in the buddha's own object, which is basically what the bodhisattvas of the eighth bhumi also see. As these bodhisattvas are still somewhat affected by their remaining cognitive hindrance, the mandala that they see is still not quite the same as that of the buddha's own object.

### ***Mandala of the Fully Revealed Truth—absolute truth***

The *Guhyagarbha Tantra* speaks of seven aspects of absolute truth: that of dharmadhatu, wisdom, and result. Absolute truth of result contains the buddha's enlightened body, speech, mind, qualities, and activity.

Absolute truth of dharmadhatu is great emptiness, expounded in the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, devoid of any attachment, conceptual elaboration, and delusion. This is Madhyamaka's definition of dharmadhatu as well as that of Vajrayana. Absolute truth of wisdom refers to clear light, elucidated in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma. Absolute truth of result denotes the buddha's enlightened body, speech, mind, qualities, and activity inherent in all sentient beings.

The enlightened body, speech, mind, qualities, and activity are neither of the nirmanakaya nor the sambhogakaya, i.e., deities with heads, limbs, shapes, and colors as mentioned above, but that of the dharmakaya and are therefore without marks. It is a special function or merit of the luminous mind which in fact already possesses the body, speech, mind, qualities, and activity of the dharmakaya. Both sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya are but images appearing from dharmakaya. The real buddha is the buddha's dharmakaya.

The reason tantra is also called the Vajra Vehicle is to indicate ground and fruition are one and the same, just like the vajra itself represents oneness.

The *Guhyagarbha Tantra* further sums up the seven aspects of absolute truth into two: absolute truth of purity and equality. Absolute truth of purity refers to the luminous aspect, such as luminosity, mandala of the buddhas, primordial purity, and so on. Absolute truth of equality is dharmadhatu because no conceptual elaboration exists in dharmadhatu. What is not equal then? The original equality of dharmadhatu becomes unequal due to sentient beings' attachment to all the cognizing subjects and the cognized objects—self and others, sentient and non-sentient worlds, samsara and nirvana, etc. When all attachment which is biased disappears into dharmadhatu, it is absolute truth of equality.

Vajrayana emphasizes these two absolute truths the most. They are also the absolute truths that are expounded in the second and the third turning of the wheel of Dharma. The *Lankavatara Sutra*, a scripture of the third turning, says the external object is mind. From this point of view, the *Lankavatara Sutra* is a Yogācāra text. But it also says the nature of mind is emptiness and luminosity, stressing particularly great emptiness, maha-sunyata. From this standpoint, the *Lankavatara Sutra* can be deemed a Madhyamaka text.

Normally the Buddhist scriptures that we see are mostly refutations of the view of Yogācāra by the Madhyamaka masters, such as Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, etc. In this regard, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra do have contradictions. However, we must note that in addition to the difference between the Satyākāravāda and Alikākāravāda within Yogācāra, there is also a distinction between the School of Scriptural Tradition and the School of Logical Tradition in Yogācāra. The School of Scriptural Tradition denotes the Yogācāra view presented in the *Lankavatara Sutra* and the like. The School of Logical Tradition denotes the treatises written by other people later on, such as *Treatise in Twenty Stanzas*, *Treatise in Thirty Stanzas*, and so on. Usually, it is the School of Logical Tradition that is refuted in the Madhyamaka texts. We must be clear about this. The School of Scriptural Tradition and Madhyamaka are not contradictory in the first place, at least not on the view of emptiness and clear light; Madhyamaka and the real views of Yogācāra masters like Asanga and others are also not contradictory. However, some Yogācāra teachers, having not gained realization, proceeded to interpret the texts their own way and subsequently established their own sect and rejected other views; they maintained that alaya consciousness is self-existent. It is views such as this that

Nagarjuna and other like-minded masters meant to refute.

The reason I mention this is because Vajrayana and Yogācāra have many similarities. Rongzom Pandita once said, "From the standpoint of relative truth, Vajrayana is closer to Yogācāra." Vajrayana holds that an external object can either be mind itself, an illusion of mind, or a phenomenon created by mind. Whatever it is, there is no external object that exists independently of mind.

If Yogācāra gives up the view that alaya consciousness is self-existent, it is not only exactly the same as Madhyamaka on the view of emptiness but also in line with that of Vajrayana.

### ***The Way to Actualize the Mandala***

There is no other way to validate the view above than to practice. Without practice, one can never understand these viewpoints. To practice, one must follow its order—first start with the four outer preliminaries like contemplating the preciousness of human birth, impermanence, and so on to strengthen renunciation; next cultivate bodhicitta; then rely on the Vajrasattva practice to reduce negative karma, and the mandala offering practice to accumulate merit. Subsequently, there are other uncommon preliminary practices of Vajrayana. After completing all these, the authentic vajra masters in the past would practice samatha (calm abiding) for about three years; lastly they would practice the Great Perfection and, at this point, attain realization with relative ease.

### **PHENOMENA OF THE INTERMEDIATE STATE**

The aforementioned clear light and the mandala of the buddhas also appear during the intermediate state. Those who are proficient in the practice of bardo may thus attain buddhahood

in this state. In fact, the whole process and the practice are explained clearly in *Bardo Thodol*. Everyone should learn this teaching as it is very important.

When we see these deities in the bardo state, we must remember they are not something external, not ghosts or devils, but manifestations of the purity of our own body and mind, just like the images projected on the screen by a projector. Our fear can be dispelled by this knowledge. We are not yet enlightened, but knowing the deities represent the purity of our eyes, ears, nose, etc., as well as the mandala of the buddhas and the nature of mind, and praying to them earnestly, we can still attain buddhahood. As it is said in *Bardo Thodol*, if one can recognize the yidam deities in the bardo state and abide in it, one may instantly achieve enlightenment. Conversely, if one does not know the deities are the purity of one's mind, one will be terrified of the shockingly dreadful faces of the female deities and hence miss the opportunity to attain buddhahood.

What does abiding in a certain state mean? Is it to be without thought or to think repeatedly, for example, "this is my eye consciousness"? Neither. To abide in a state, one must have certain realization; in other words, it is always to abide in a realized state. Without attaining realization now, there will not be much hope of attaining it in the intermediate state. Therefore, it is critical to gain realization when one is still alive. Nonetheless, to just look at the images of the deities regularly to familiarize oneself with them and to recall the mandala often will still be of great help when the time comes.

In Tibet in the past, to introduce the mandala of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities, some children would be bathed in sandalwood infused water; next they would put on the deities' masks or paint their faces in the deities' image, wear specific clothes and ornaments, then be placed on the high Dharma seats. The other people below would look at them

through a crystal taped to their eye. The master, sitting by the side, would explain each deity one by one, "When you die, this will appear.... So, get used to it now."

In order for everyone to understand the light and the dots emitted from the deity's heart, the masters would pull out in front of the children a piece of cloth about a palm's length plus four inches wide and place a few bronze mirrors on different sections of the cloth. The cloth would be used to introduce the color of the deity. For example, when speaking of the buddha field of Buddha Ratnasambhava, yellow cloth would be spread over the surrounding area; when speaking of the buddha field of Amitabha, red cloth would be used.

When looking at any object through the crystal, some rainbow-like colors can be seen around the edges of the object; the object itself can also be seen quite clearly.

Moreover, by looking at the thangka or model of the mandala of hundred peaceful and wrathful deities regularly and prostrating to the one hundred deities every day, one can also eliminate much negative karma, including very serious transgressions like breaking the samaya vows. According to tantra, this is a very effective way to clear karmic hindrances.

In this Age of Dharma Decline wherein sentient beings suffer from great afflictions, we are lucky the tantric teachings have been kept intact. The process of attaining enlightenment through the sutric practice alone is an extremely long one; therefore, we really ought to take the Vajrayana teachings seriously. If we have started to practice, it is a step in the right direction; results are sure to be attained down the path. If renunciation and bodhicitta are developed, we even have the chance to attain enlightenment in this lifetime through the practice of Vajrayana.

Naturally, even the sublime tantric teachings cannot produce results immediately. So it would be difficult to expect



enlightenment within a couple of months or one to two years even. With regard to Dharma practice, we should have a long-term plan not only for this life but also for our next life.

In *Bardo Thodol*, there are also some quite important aspiration prayers which can lend great support if one recites them regularly. We all must face death sooner or later. It would be a pity if one were not mentally prepared.

### COMMENTS ON BARDO THODOL FROM A WESTERN PSYCHIATRIST

In the 1920s, an American scholar came to the East to search for the essence of spirituality and stumbled upon the teaching of the intermediate state. In 1927, through the efforts of Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdub (translator) and W. Y. Evans-Wentz (editor), *Bardo Thodol* (also known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* or *Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State*) was published in the United States and has since become the most influential Tibetan Buddhist text in the English-speaking world. The book includes a foreword by the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung who wrote:

‘For years, ever since it was first published, the Bardo Thodol has been my constant companion, and to it I owe not only many stimulating ideas and discoveries, but also many fundamental insights.’

‘...the Bardo Thodol offers one an intelligible philosophy addressed to human beings rather than to gods or primitive savages. Its philosophy contains the quintessence of Buddhist psychological criticism; and, as such, one can truly say that it is of unexampled superiority.’

‘They are so detailed and thoroughly adapted to the apparent changes in the dead man’s condition that every serious-minded reader must ask himself whether these

wise old lamas might not, after all, have caught a glimpse of the fourth dimension and twitched the veil from the greatest of life’s secrets.’

‘I am sure that all who read this book with open eyes, and who allow it to impress itself upon them without prejudice, will reap a rich reward.’

‘The *Bardo Thodol* began by being a “closed” book, and so it has remained, no matter what kind of commentaries may be written upon it. For it is a book that will only open itself to spiritual understanding, and this is a capacity which no man is born with, but which he can only acquire through special training and special experience.’

### ANALYSIS OF A FALLACY

How absurd that some people even claim that Vajrayana is Hinduism!

I cannot help but question these people: Do you mean the whole of Vajrayana or its essential doctrine is Hinduism? Or, Vajrayana has something in common with Hinduism?

If the whole of Vajrayana were to be deemed Hinduism, many excellent views in sutra would also be deemed the same. According to Nagarjuna, dependent origination is a concept unique to Buddhism, but dependent origination is also a subject regularly taught in Vajrayana. In addition to the view of emptiness, Vajrayana upholds the central topic of prajnaparamita of the second turning, and clear light of tathāgatagarbha set forth in the important texts of the third turning such as *Treatise on the Sublime Continuum (Uttaratantra)* and *In Praise of the Dharmadhatu*. It just demonstrates that the view of Vajrayana and that of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra are in sync on many subjects. Given this, wouldn’t Madhyamaka and Yogācāra be considered Hinduism as well?

If the most significant, the most essential points of Vajrayana were deemed Hinduism, the aforementioned seven aspects of absolute truth or the two absolute truths of purity and equality, the most crucial viewpoint of Vajrayana, would all be considered tenets of Hinduism. Then, what else is there to distinguish Buddhism from others? Nothing. If luminosity and emptiness were all counted as views of Hinduism, it would be a slander against not only Vajrayana but also Buddhism as a whole.

Undeniably, some tantric terminologies are somewhat similar to that of Hinduism or other non-Buddhist systems of belief, but it doesn't mean anything as sutra also has many terms that are similar to the other systems. It is true that on the surface the terminologies from both sides look very much alike. Without in-depth knowledge of both systems, a person cannot possibly make the distinction.

Once Atisha also said, "If I don't go back, I'm afraid there won't be anybody in India who can really tell the difference between Buddhist and non-Buddhist ideas." One can only imagine the degree of difficulty therein.

Shantarakshita, Kamalasila's master, used many terms borrowed from the non-Buddhist texts at the end of his *Madyamakalandara*, terms such as signlessness, clear light, free from all conceptual elaborations, inconceivable, etc. that are very similar to the Buddhist version. There is no way a regular Buddhist can detect the flaws or differences in the meaning of these terms.

The original plan of some of these people was to assign Vajrayana to the non-Buddhist camp, but by doing that they also inadvertently assigned their own views to the other side. It is definitely a big mistake to assert Vajrayana is a non-Buddhist belief only because they have similar terminologies. These people have never studied the Vajrayana teachings systematically;

by drawing a rash conclusion, they slander the Dharma and commit evil karma themselves. There is no benefit to the Dharma or to sentient beings.

According to Maitreya, the karma of committing any of the five hellish deeds can still be purified by repentance through genuine Dharma practice; however, if genuine Dharma is vilified, there is no way to repent any more.

It is also said in *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras* by Maitreya that hatred cannot be directed at even insentient objects like a stone, a wall, or a house. Thus, to slander the Dharma without knowing anything about it is all the more reprehensible. If one doesn't understand a teaching, one should neither praise nor criticize it.

We should be mindful of these words from Maitreya. Real Buddhists ought not to parrot the words of others too casually.

## PROBLEMS OF VAJRAYANA PRACTITIONERS TODAY

The problems with Vajrayana Buddhists nowadays are:

First, other than going to the temples to worship the Buddha or reading some scriptures at home, many never concern themselves with questions like liberation or contemplative practice. Some don't even know what meditation is. The so-called practice that some claim to be doing comes down to merely asking for empowerment of Jambhala or praying to Jambhala, the god of wealth. In fact, all is done for gaining health, longevity, wealth, and so on instead of liberation.

Second, everybody likes to receive empowerment, but it is very serious downfall if one never learns what the samayas are and fails to observe them after receiving empowerment. An analogy between Vajrayana and an airplane makes a good point: To practice Vajrayana is like taking an airplane. It brings you to your destination faster. But if the plane crashes, you die. Sure,

results can be had faster through Vajrayana practice, but so is the possibility of going to vajra hell if one breaks the samayas and not repent. Therefore, we must remain highly mindful of the Vajrayana precepts.

Third, many practitioners go everywhere to receive empowerment but hardly ever bother to examine the teacher. Although in Vajrayana practice empowerment is very important, it is even more important to examine the person conferring the empowerment. The situation now is somewhat confusing. Among the so-called tulkus or reincarnate masters, it is hard to say how many of them are real. When meeting someone who claims himself or herself to be the tenth or the eighteenth reincarnation of a certain master, be sure not to receive empowerment from this person too quickly. Tulkus do exist, but the self-proclaimed tulkus may not be true tulkus.

Before receiving any empowerment, it is absolutely necessary to find a truly qualified vajra master through careful examination.

However, one need not be paranoid either and assume anyone with a title of tulku or vajra master is a fraud. The right attitude should be to respect all who wear the kasaya robe because the robe at least is something that was blessed by the Buddha. But to receive teachings or empowerment from any person, one must be careful not to misjudge the person or receive empowerment recklessly.

Fourth, when transmitting Vajrayana practice, some teachers do not ask if one has generated renunciation and bodhicitta but whether the five preliminary practices have been completed. If the answer is yes, then one is deemed qualified to undertake Vajrayana practice. With respect to the preliminary practice, many people do not take the practice seriously when only the process, not the quality, is emphasized. I personally think this is a very bad practice for Vajrayana.

Even worse, some who are ignorant about the importance of following the sequence of practice would tell others who are preparing to do preliminary practice that one can bypass the preliminaries and go straight to the main practice. This results in certain people eventually giving up their preliminary practice.

In today's environment and education system, people are taught things that are opposite to what renunciation stands for. Under the circumstance, genuine practice cannot take place when the preliminary practice is abandoned and, as a result, renunciation and bodhicitta are not generated.

We are usually unable to tell if our negative karma has been reduced by undertaking the practice of penitence. Some signs in our dreams may be the most we can hope for, but it is still not totally sure. Neither do we know the extent of the merit that we have managed to accumulate. But these are not big problems. The main concern should be whether we have engendered renunciation and bodhicitta, which no one knows better than we ourselves. Actually, once renunciation and bodhicitta are generated, merit will be accumulated and negative karma purified at the same time. We can then set out on the path with ease of mind.

Fifth, some people who are relatively new to Buddhist teachings and practice somehow decide that they want to lead a monastic life. To many Chinese, the impression associated with choosing this kind of path is quite negative. Other than those who really understand what it is about, most people and family members in particular are against it. There have been cases of families thrown into turmoil because of this. It is of course a wonderful thing to lead a monastic life if we have genuine renunciation, as human birth is indeed rare and precious. Nevertheless, it is not a decision to be made recklessly, not until all the right conditions have come together. Before then, we should give up on the idea at least temporarily.

On the other hand, while still leading a secular life, we should not use our job or stress as an excuse not to practice. It is not that easy to encounter Mahayana teachings, even harder to come across the Vajrayana teachings. So, we must seize the opportunity and make good use of our time. Spiritual practice must be integrated with everyday life and work. To be able to strike a balance between the two is key.

## The Generation Stage

All Vajrayana practices can be subsumed under the categories of the generation stage and the completion stage.

The practice of the generation stage is to purify phenomena primarily through visualization of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and their mandalas. The practice of the completion stage is to realize emptiness with practices based on the channels, wind-energies, and essences of the subtle body. To practice the union of the generation and the completion stages is to visualize the yidam (the meditational deity) as an illusion, as a dream. Normally the proper sequence of practice is to practice the generation stage first, then the completion stage, but there is no need to follow this sequence in the practice of the union of the two stages. From the standpoint of phenomena, it is the generation stage; the dream-like, illusory emptiness represents the completion stage.

### WHY THIS TEACHING IS NECESSARY

In this Age of Dharma Decline, practitioners always tend to have myriad problems. For example, they pay less attention to the foundational elements of achieving accomplishment in Vajrayana practice such as visualization, recitation, cultivation of the right view, mindfulness, etc., but busy themselves instead with just the formalities of practice such as the mandalas, rituals,

offerings, vajra dance, and so on. In so doing, the result from practice cannot manifest, nor can the four activities (pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, subjugating) be accomplished.

All yidam practices, whether the deity is peaceful or wrathful, involve the generation stage. One cannot do deity practice without knowing how to practice the generation stage. To properly practice the generation stage in a retreat, one should first complete all the preliminaries, also pay particular attention to the process—there are many complicated requirements regarding the time, place, format of the retreat, and the time and format of ending the retreat, and so on. We don't need to know the details for the time being, as many people have not yet undertaken the preliminary practice; even if some people have completed the preliminaries once, the quality of the practice is still less than satisfactory. However, the method of visualization is very important. If one is unable to visualize clearly, the entire result of practice will be adversely affected. The preliminary practices, such as the ones for taking refuge, Vajrasattva, and Guru Yoga, also entail the practice of the generation stage. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly explain this practice.

Of course, this is just a brief introduction to the general structure of the generation stage or deity practice, which applies to all practices and serves as the steps and standard that all should follow. To understand the generation stage in more detail, it is best to refer to the text and sadhana of the individual practice.

### THE EFFICACY OF THE GENERATION STAGE

The treatise *Establishing Phenomena as Divine* by Rongzom Pandita explicates the view of the generation stage. First of all, we should know that the essence of all things is the mandala of the buddhas. To reveal this mandala and to actualize its theoretical

view, we must rely on the practice of the generation stage. The generation stage is the best skillful means to forcibly realize the truth that “all phenomena are the mandala of the buddhas.”

Vajrayana holds that ordinary people have two kinds of attachment: the first is attachment to phenomena, that is, attachment to the inherent impurity of phenomena; the second is attachment to phenomena being not only impure but also real. Encompassed in the second attachment are the Sutrayana notions of “attachment to self of person” and “attachment to self of phenomena.”

The first attachment can be eliminated with the practice of the generation stage. However, if we know only the method but not the view, confusion may arise during the practice—for instance, one might ask whether this practice is the same as the white skeleton visualization in Theravada, wherein an illusion is produced after the visualization. Such confusion can cause great obstacles to our practice, hence it is important to establish the view—to resolutely believe that all phenomena are the mandala of the buddhas. On the other hand, having the view but not actually applying it to the practice, the knowledge remains always just theoretical. Even if we can accept the view that all phenomena are the mandala of the buddhas, there is no way we can really experience how that is so. This is why we need the practice.

Most people believe the world as we know it will always stay the same as long as our sense organs do not change accidentally over the course of life. This is why the present world appears real, stable, but also impure to us.

But in fact, this is not so. Let's first put aside the argument whether the world exists or not. Even if it exists, the world cannot affect us in any way if our five sense organs do not interact with it; it is the same as if it does not exist. For example, if our ear consciousness stops perceiving sound waves, then

it does not matter, objectively speaking, whether sound waves exist or not. If they are perceived, sound in the impure state is a phenomenon of our mind; in the pure state, sound is transformed into the words of the buddha. After the generation stage practice is accomplished, this so-called unchanging world will be completely inverted. All impure phenomena will no longer exist; instead, the mandala of the buddhas will appear before the practitioner. The process of an ordinary person attaining buddhahood is in fact the process of transforming consciousness into wisdom.

Through practicing the generation stage, pure phenomena—that all is the mandala of the buddhas—will manifest; this is also the state of the eighth-ground bodhisattva after emerging from meditation.

### THE THREE SAMADHIS

According to the tantras of Nyingmapa, the generation stage consists of three types of samadhi: the samadhi of thusness, the samadhi of universal manifestation, and the causal samadhi.

Through the three samadhis, the three phases in samsara—death, intermediate state, rebirth—can be transformed into the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya of the buddha. The three kayas are the fruition, the three samadhis are the path, and the three phases in samsara are the impure ground.

#### *The Samadhi of Thusness*

Thusness means realm of truth (dharmadhātu), nature of reality (dharmata), emptiness, luminosity. The samadhi of thusness is meditation on emptiness. Once the pre-meditation steps of taking refuge, generating bodhicitta, and praying to the guru have all been completed, practice the samadhi of thusness.

If one has attained realization, just abide in the state of realization but not too long. One who has not gained realization should maintain firm belief in the view that the nature of all phenomena is emptiness; this is said to be a similar version of the samadhi of thusness—not real samadhi, only close to it.

Through the samadhi of thusness, death can be transformed into or purified as dharmakaya, a practice that is unique to tantra. Although sutra also practices emptiness, it does not have the power to purify, only to eliminate defilement, because it lacks the tantric view. Another function of the samadhi of thusness is to destroy the view of eternalists. For in the subsequent practices, all the mandalas of the buddhas are also perceived to be of empty nature; nothing exists permanently. Therefore, the samadhi of thusness is able to abolish the eternalist view.

#### *The Samadhi of Universal Manifestation*

Universal manifestation refers to phenomena, primarily great compassion. After the completion of the samadhi of thusness, practice great compassion toward sentient beings who have not gained realization of emptiness; it need not be long.

One of the functions of the samadhi of universal manifestation is to transform the bardo body into or purify the body as sambhogakaya. Although sutra also practices great compassion, it does not have the ability to purify because it lacks the view that sentient beings are buddhas already. Another function of the samadhi of universal manifestation is to eradicate the nihilistic view.

When a realized practitioner practices great compassion and loving-kindness while in the enlightened state, compassion and loving-kindness are in union with emptiness and at once illusory; when the view of Vajrayana is added, this practice is empowered to effect transformation or purification.

If the first two samadhis are missing, a practitioner who is undertaking the practice of the wrathful deity will develop attachment to the wrathful deity due to ignorance of the void nature of the deity; absent compassion, if such a person holds the wrong view or mistaken aspiration at the time of death, he or she may end up being a demon or evil spirit with supernatural power in the next life, causing great harm to sentient beings. This is why the two samadhis are indispensable. If all the generation stage can be practiced around the framework of these two samadhis, there will be no room for mistake because the practice is based on emptiness and compassion.

Visualization not based on the view of emptiness and compassion is also practiced by non-Buddhists; some of these visualizations are quite powerful as well, but they do not lead to liberation. In other words, with no concept of emptiness nor foundation in compassion, one cannot attain any supramundane accomplishment in the deity practice.

### ***The Causal Samadhi***

Attaining buddhahood is called the resultant stage. As we have not yet attained buddhahood, it is called the causal stage. In actuality, all phenomena are the mandala of the buddhas; cause and result are inseparable, but there is still a discrepancy between cause and result on the surface.

The causal samadhi covers a very broad range, including visualizations of all the peaceful and wrathful deities.

### **THE FOUR YOGAS**

Those who have advanced to the bodhisattva grounds are able to accomplish myriad activities, such as practicing the six paramitas, delivering sentient beings on an inconceivable scale,

even purifying their own negative karma and so on, all through the power of meditation. Whereas we ordinary people are often left exhausted, having to use our words to spread the Dharma and actions to benefit sentient beings, but with limited result.

A person's body, speech, mind, and activity make up the whole person. Likewise, a buddha's body, speech, wisdom, and activities to free sentient beings from suffering encompass all the qualities of the buddha. Not only tantra but sutra also acknowledges that ultimately the body of a sentient being can be the body of the buddha, the words of sentient beings can become the words of the buddha, the defiled minds of sentient beings the wisdom of the buddha, and the activities of sentient beings the buddha's activities to deliver all to liberation, but sutra offers no specific method to make such a transformation. On the other hand, many skillful means are available in tantra to free sentient beings from suffering. Through the four yogas which are unique to Vajrayana, the body, speech, mind, and activities of sentient beings can be transformed into that of the buddha.

### ***Yoga of Deity's Form***

This is essentially visualization of the deity's physical form and mandala. Through this visualization, the body of a sentient being can be transformed into, made to manifest as, or purified as the body's original state—the body of the divine.

Most people are troubled by two problems: one is not being able to visualize clearly, the other is not being able to keep the mind still during sitting meditation.

A discursive mind needs samatha meditation as its antidote. If the visualization is not clear, it is because one is either not doing the visualization practice satisfactorily or does not understand the visualization method and technique. A brief

introduction to this method was given in my discussion on the Vajrasattva practice in Luminous Wisdom Series, but I shall repeat it here and focus on the key points.

At the outset of practicing the generation stage, we need an external object to help with visualization; otherwise it would be quite hard to just rely on our own imagination to form a deity image, something only people of superior faculty can achieve. However, the situation today is quite absurd. Regardless of the individual's capacity, everyone practices visualization like a person of superior faculty, without the help of any external object; the result can be nothing but failure.

Here, the external object is a thangka. When we do the Vajrasattva practice, we need a thangka of Vajrasattva; to do the Manjusri practice, we need a thangka of Manjusri, and so on. First, look at the thangka to visualize the deity; next, without looking at the thangka, practice the visualization by memory; lastly, transfer the deity image on the thangka to our own body, that is, visualize our own body as that of the deity. Just do this step by step.

The size of the deity image on the thangka to be used for visualization must adhere to the standard prescribed in the *Sutra on the Production of Buddha Images*. Furthermore, in terms of composition, thangkas for visualization and ordinary thangkas also differ. In an ordinary thangka, the central deity is surrounded by many lineage teachers, buddhas, bodhisattvas, offerings, and so on. Whereas a thangka for the purpose of visualization can only have one central deity; no other image is allowed to avoid distraction to one's line of vision. The thangka must also be consecrated before it can be used for visualization.

When actually doing the practice, first hang up the thangka in a place with relatively good light, not too dark with light behind the thangka, nor too bright with light directly on the thangka; prepare some simple offerings in front of the thangka,

then sit down in front of the thangka in the Vairocana seven-point posture and gaze intently at the thangka. Begin by looking at the whole thangka, then the details of the deity image—face, body (left hand, right hand, left leg, right leg), ornaments, clothing, etc. When you feel you are familiar enough with the image, close your eyes and see if the image appears clearly to you. If you are able to visualize this way, just continue the practice with your eyes closed; if not, you should open your eyes and look at the thangka again.

There are three ways to visualize the details of the image. The first is for people of superior faculty. One just visualizes directly in the mind without any external assistance. For example, when visualizing the third eye on the forehead of the wrathful deity, the vision will appear clearly in the mind right away.

The second is for people of average faculty. When doing visualization, one does not rely on a thangka but instead on one's own voice or words by muttering to oneself: the deity's eyes have five colors, the pupil in the center is very dark, then white, finally red, and so on. It is not necessary to follow any sadhana, just using plain words will do. Visualize as the words are spoken. It has the same effect as doing visualization while reading the sadhana—reading without visualization is not effective, whereas to visualize without reading is hard to do. Be sure to speak slowly.

The third is for people of inferior faculty. In this case, one must rely on a detailed picture of the parts to be visualized. For example, photograph or scan the deity's eyes, enlarge it, and print out the picture fit for visualization. Then repeatedly practice visualization as mentioned above.

A person who is truly practicing the generation stage should visualize this way rather than just generate a blurred image or indistinct outline of the deity during visualization, as we



normally do.

At the beginning, we should spend more time looking at the deity image and less time visualizing with eyes closed; later we can gradually extend the time we spend on visualization. In the past, if a practitioner sat down to meditate four times a day, the two sittings during the day alternated between looking at the deity under natural light and visualizing with the eyes closed; the sittings in the early morning and at night only entailed visualization with eyes closed due to the absence of light. It's different now. Even at night, the lights are bright enough so it no longer matters whether we practice in the day or at night; we are free to arrange at will.

During visualization, if some parts come up clear, some parts not so clear, we need to look at those that are not so clear again and again. If the image to be visualized and that which appears are different --for example, we visualize a sitting buddha but a standing buddha appears instead when we close our eyes; we visualize a tiny image but a huge one appears; we visualize a colorful image but a black and white version appears, and so on—we still need to look at the deity image repeatedly and steadily. With practice, this problem can be solved.

To train in samadhi practice, after a clear visualization of the deity image is attained, we also need to visualize the different motions of the deity such as walking, abiding, sitting, and lying down; or visualize the deity as grand as a mountain or as small as a sesame seed, etc. Our visualization is considered satisfactory when we can handle these steps with ease.

Visualizing the deity image is the basic practice. Next is seeing our own eyes as the eyes of the deity that we have visualized, our hands as the hands of the visualized deity, and every part of our body as one part of the deity's body. Finally, attachment to our own body as impure gradually disappears and is replaced with an appearance of the divine. Practitioners who

are extremely capable can feel this change, such as the feeling of wearing the crown with the Five Tathagatas, after six months of practice; with further practice, they can touch this crown on their own head; with still further practice, they can see that their own body is exactly the body of the deity (of course, no one else can see this.) It is said at this point that the practice of the generation stage is successfully done.

Practitioners who are serious, diligent, and of ripened capacity can meet this standard in six months. Some tantras are of the opinion that people of superior faculty can successfully accomplish the practice of the generation stage in three days, those of average faculty in seven days, and those of inferior faculty in one month. However, most of us may not even be able to visualize clearly in six months' time, let alone in one month. For people who hold a job, it is particularly difficult since they can meditate at most one or two hours a day; if they have additional matters to attend to, it will take even longer to complete the practice satisfactorily.

After accomplishing the generation stage, one can visualize all phenomena are pure, but once out of meditation, all phenomena will return to their impure state. As the quality of one's practice improves, the world will also look increasingly pure; on attaining the bodhisattva's eighth ground, pure phenomena will be as stable as the things that appear now in our daily life. By then, it can be said that we are beginning to see the true face of the world.

Having practiced the generation stage satisfactorily, what one sees during meditative concentration is exactly the same as that of the eighth ground bodhisattva, that is, one's body and the surrounding world are all pure appearances. Because the vision that "all phenomena are the mandala of the buddhas" can manifest rather swiftly, the generation stage is labeled as the skillful means to forcibly arouse pure perception. Nevertheless,

this outcome is possible only with certain conditions and the proper foundation—which are the outer and inner preliminaries, and other tantric practices. A person's capacity is not classified on the basis of race, knowledge, or other such criteria, but on his or her foundation in preliminary practice. Absent the preliminaries, the generation stage cannot yield any result.

Because Vajrayana offers many simple but practical methods, such as the generation stage practice through which one can attain the bodhisattva's eighth ground in Sutrayana swiftly and with ease, it is called the "Skillful Means Vehicle."

Sometimes, sutra and outer tantra also mention how to do visualization. For instance, they advise practitioners to visualize Sakyamuni Buddha when reading the *sādhana* of Sakyamuni Buddha, to visualize Amitabha when reading the *sādhana* of Amitabha, and so forth. However, the visualization practices in sutra and outer tantra lack the key points mentioned above; their views are also not as profound. Hence, they are not in the same category as the generation stage practice in inner tantra, nor can they achieve the three results of the generation stage.

### ***Yoga of Deity's Speech***

This is to transform impure words into the words of the deity through reading and recitation.

Mantra, in the real sense of absolute truth, is not sound, letter, language, or symbol, but the luminous mind or *tathāgatagarbha*. The mantra that we normally recite, such as the heart mantra of Vajrasattva *Om Benzā Satva Hum* also has six different levels of understanding. Presently, our understanding is at the lowest level. That is, we think mantra is essentially the words and voice of a human; the only difference between mantra and speaking or singing is whether it has the power to give blessing, to remove obstacles, and to help attain spiritual

accomplishment. Still, it is essentially one's own voice. At the highest level, it is knowing the mantra *Om Benzā Satva Hum* is itself Vajrasattva, that the deity Vajrasattva and the sound of us reciting *Om Benzā Satva Hum* are one and the same.

Many people upon seeing the Vajrasattva image consider it endowed with merit and therefore right to pay respect, but not so with the mantra as it comes from our own voice. This is a wrong view. In fact, the Vajrasattva image is a picture drawn with mineral paints by a painter, therefore a tainted phenomenon as well, which is essentially no different from the painting of an animal except for its blessing power. It is because we see the image of Vajrasattva as something divine that it can somehow benefit us in a certain way. If we were to see a deity image the same as a painting of an animal, it would not be able to grant any blessing, even if the image is that of a buddha.

Actually, the image of Vajrasattva hung on the wall is what we see with our eyes. When our eye consciousness perceives the image of Vajrasattva, the image is in fact our eye consciousness, which is a phenomenon of mind. Likewise, the sound *Om Benzā Satva Hum* is the object our auditory faculty perceives; it is our ear consciousness which is also a phenomenon of mind. That is to say, the deity perceived by the eye consciousness and the mantra recited are all phenomena of supreme wisdom, just that one appears as a sound and the other as an image. The two are absolutely the same. The mantra can serve its purpose only if we understand why the mantra and the image are one and the same.

Furthermore, it is the view of Vajrayana that reciting mantra and speaking essentially are both the deity's speech. It is only due to our own misunderstanding that we attach merit to reciting mantra but not speaking. Since we have not realized the nature of speech itself is the deity's speech, we don't think there is any merit in speaking. After attaining realization, we will

fully understand reciting mantra and simply talking are exactly of one taste, perfectly equal in absolute reality; the two can produce the same effect at that time. However, before we attain realization, even though all things are empty by nature, the view of emptiness cannot help us with this understanding.

It is very important to know what mantra represents. Without a correct understanding of mantra, no matter how many times one recites the mantra, it can only alleviate negative karma caused by unwholesome words, but not gain any accomplishment. However, with the aforementioned right view, the effectiveness of applying mantra recitation to reduce negative karma, increase merit, and attain realization will be very different.

One can refer to *Essence of Clear Light*, Ju Mipham Rinpoche's commentary on the *Guhyaagarbha Tantra*, for the other four kinds of understanding of mantra.

Those with pure devotion and who undertake the Vajrasattva practice diligently may very likely see Vajrasattva in person. From the biographies of countless practitioners in both Tibet and China, we can tell many had personal encounters with deities such as Manjusri, Chenrezig, Vajrasattva, etc., and were able to discourse with the deities like we do with other people.

In Vajrayana, much attention is paid to the way of reciting mantra. Of the many requirements, the most basic are the following:

### *Visualization*

When undertaking the Vajrasattva practice, we should visualize ourselves as the deity Vajrasattva and firmly believe we are indeed Vajrasattva.

In *Beacon of Certainty*, Mipham Rinpoche said if one does not see oneself as the real Vajrasattva but only as Vajrasattva

when practicing visualization, the view and the practice as well as the theory and the application are in contradiction. To conduct practice in such a way will not yield any good result.

In most visualizations, one visualizes one's heart as a lotus flower; next one visualizes at the center of the heart the flat sun and moon disks, and on the disks the standing ritual object of the yidam, such as the sword of Manjusri, the vajra of Vajrasattva, and so on. The vajra is empty inside; in the empty space one visualizes even smaller sun and moon disks on which the seed mantra stands, and so on. There are other visualizations, such as to visualize oneself as Chenrezig, next at the heart center a very small Amitabha, then at Amitabha's heart center the ritual object, and the mantra inside the ritual object. This is called the three-fold sattva. That is, Chenrezig is the yidam, Amitabha at the heart center is the wisdom yidam, and the seed mantra within is the mind of samadhi. Chenrezig on the outside represents the buddha's body, Amitabha the buddha's speech, and the seed mantra the buddha's mind. This way the visualization is complete with the body, speech, and mind of the buddha. The more detailed and complex the visualization is, the more focused one can be, which is why visualization needs to be done this way.

However, preliminary practices are not as complicated. For example, the Vajrasattva practice in the preliminaries only involves visualization of a moon disk at Vajrasattva's heart and the mantra on the moon disk; there is no need to visualize a second yidam, a vajra, or anything else. Different practices have different visualizations, but the ultimate meaning is the same.

As the Vajrayana teaching has always relied on the meaning, not just on the words, it is not necessary to visualize the seed syllables in Sanskrit; to visualize in Tibetan is wholly acceptable. Of course, it is also fine to visualize the seed mantra in Chinese, as long as there is a generally accepted Chinese term. For the

time being, it is more convenient to just visualize the mantra in Tibetan because many mantras, such as the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, already have an established Tibetan version.

Many people take Sanskrit as the Buddhist official language, but actually it is not so. Sanskrit was first used by non-Buddhists who believed Sanskrit was created by Brahma, just like many religions believe the universe is the creation of God. In fact, Sanskrit is not from Brahma; according to one opinion, it is from Aramaic, a member of the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family.

When visualizing the seed syllables, if it is a short mantra, just visualize the syllables arranged in a circle; if the mantra is longer, such as the hundred-syllable mantra, visualize the syllables in several circles. To visualize, first write down the Tibetan syllables, then place them in front and behold. When each syllable can be visualized with ease, move on to the next step.

Many seed syllables should be visualized in rotation, some to the right and some to the left. The syllables moving rightwards face outside so that they can be read in the order of their rotation from outside; the syllables moving leftwards should be visualized facing inside so that people in the center can read them in the order of their rotation. Generally speaking, the seed syllables of male deities rotate rightwards and those of female deities rotate leftwards, though there are some exceptions.

At the start of visualization, every syllable is standing upright on the moon disc. When visualizing the rotation, all the syllables rise up from the moon disc and float in the space, at the same time radiating the color and shape of light that correspond to the practice at hand. First, the light rotates, then the syllables. On the other hand, not all seed syllables need to

rotate; for example, the hundred-syllable mantra does not move. When rotating, start slowly, then proceed with increasing speed. This is intended to help train one's ability to gain meditative concentration.

When sitting down to meditate, use two thirds of the time for visualization, and the remaining one third for mantra recitation.

### *Method of Recitation*

After the visualization is complete, recite the mantra. The sound of recitation shouldn't be too fast or too slow, not too strong, nor too weak. The requirement for standard recitation is very stringent—coughing, spitting, walking, etc. are forbidden; or the count of recitation would be deducted. Among all the offences, talking is the most serious. So, it is best to refrain from talking during mantra recitation.

The so-called recitation practice that we normally adopt—with no visualization, talking or eating while reciting—is highly inappropriate. At best, it can only reduce negative karma caused by unwholesome speech.

When undertaking the regular deity practice, we must also meet certain requirements regarding the use of prayer beads or malas. After the malas have been blessed by the master, it should be worn all the time either on the neck or on the wrist, not to be kept away from the warmth of the body, not to be seen or touched by people who are not tantric Buddhists, not to be left at unclean places, etc. There are specifications for the color and the material of the malas as well. Moreover, the malas cannot be used to count things other than the recitations of a mantra, because the malas will otherwise lose its power of blessing.

Normally, it is best to use bodhi beads for mantra recitation. Nowadays, many people like to use counters instead. But

using prayer beads is still the better choice unless in special circumstances where it is inconvenient. We should not see prayer beads as just a counting device; if used properly in accordance with the Dharma, the merit related to mantra recitation can increase many fold.

During the period of undertaking the formal yidam practice, one should not commit to doing anything else, not even things like transmitting the Dharma to benefit sentient beings, because the practice will be negatively affected. Naturally, the requirements are not as strict for other occasions such as attending puja or reciting mantra during the preliminary practice.

While practicing mantra recitation, certain types of food should also be avoided, such as garlic, scallion, animal's tongue, etc. If one adheres strictly to these requirements, varying degree of success in achieving results can be expected after the session of meditation is ended, but the actual accomplishment still depends on one's own faculty and level of diligence.

The easiest way of visualization is, when reciting the mantra of Vajrasattva, to use the mantra as your own prayer to implore Vajrasattva, not unlike calling out someone's name as you normally do. If you are devoted enough, even without much knowledge of the right view or awareness, you may still meet Vajrasattva and receive his blessing.

### *The Standard of Mantra Recitation*

There are three standards. The first is non-numerical—the number of times the mantra is to be recited is not stipulated. As long as one can personally see the yidam or there are signs of accomplishment appearing in dreams, it is enough proof that the recitation of the mantra has achieved certain effect. The second is numerical—to complete the number of recitations required

by the practice instructions. The required amount is based on how many syllables there are in a mantra. For every one syllable added to the mantra, the amount of recitations increases by 100,000. For example, the heart mantra of Vajrasattva *Om Benzā Satva Hum* has six syllables, so it needs to be recited 600,000 times. Separately, a supplement of 10,000 times is added. Every practice has its own required amount of recitations. Once this amount is reached, whether or not one feels any special blessing, the standard is met. The third is time. Even if one does not experience a special blessing and has not completed the required number of recitations, the standard is considered met so long as one follows the instructions assiduously to recite the mantra within the specified time frame for the practice.

### *Final Result*

Every practice has its own targeted result. Normally, we can sense if we have secured any result. Once this feeling is confirmed, the yidam practice has come to an end for the time being.

### *Yoga of Deity's Mind*

When practicing the generation stage, we must know at all times the visualizations, recitations, emanation of light, and other such things that we do during the practice, whether it is the sound of recitation or the vision of the mandala, are void in nature; they are just phenomena of the mind, projections of luminosity and emptiness. Finally, when the generation stage is completed, the whole mandala will again dissolve into all-encompassing space. At that time, we also need to practice emptiness; from beginning to end, we cannot deviate from the state of realizing emptiness. This is the yoga of deity's mind.

Through the practice of luminosity and emptiness, the

yoga of deity's mind, our mind which is contaminated by greed, aversion, and delusion can be transformed into the wisdom of the buddha.

### *Yoga of Deity's Activity*

The yoga of activity is to accomplish, through the light radiating from mantras, the four activities that the Buddha undertook to turn the wheel of Dharma and deliver sentient beings from suffering.

For example, in the practice of Vajrasattva, visualize the heart mantra of Vajrasattva radiating light and on top of the light abundant offerings to buddhas and bodhisattvas in the ten directions, and receiving blessings from deities in the ten directions when the light is absorbed back; then visualize again the mantra radiating light downwards to shine on sentient beings in the six realms, especially those in the three lower realms, so as to eliminate their suffering. These are the activities of the deity.

Our activities in everyday life can be transformed into that of the buddha through the yoga of activity.

The sadhana of Vajrasattva contains these four yogas—first visualize Vajrasattva, next visualize the mantra on the moon disc and recite the hundred-syllable mantra, then visualize the light emanating from the mantra, etc. Because this practice is part of the preliminaries, it does not particularly emphasize the idea of emptiness, but actually the state of emptiness is also needed for this practice.

People often ask which yidam practice they should do or who their own yidam is. The fact is there is no way to do the yidam practice if one doesn't know how to practice the generation stage, and there will be no result if the quality of the generation stage is not up to standard. On the other hand, if one has practiced the preliminaries well and undertakes the

generation stage seriously, one can hope to attain some results from the yidam practice as well.

## THE THREE ESSENTIALS OF GENERATION STAGE

### *Be Clear*

The visualization should be very clear. Although in the eyes of others you are still your usual self, all your five sense organs can perceive your body as the body of the buddha and the surroundings as the buddha field, as clearly as you used to see yourself and the world.

The requirement for the generation stage, at the minimum, is to be able to visualize very clearly. Failing to meet this requirement, no siddhi or attainment in tantra can be obtained.

### *Be Firm*

One must be firm in one's view, like "I am Vajrasattva." Lacking the view, attachment to self cannot be eliminated. As we used to be attached to the idea that the five aggregates combined is "self," now that this attachment is gone and replaced by the body of the yidam, we must remain firm in our view that "I am not an ordinary sentient being, I am Vajrasattva" and so on. Through practicing this way, attachment to the self of person can be uprooted.

### *Be Pure*

This is to know the symbolic meaning of the ornaments worn and the objects held by the yidam. These phenomena are said to be "pure" because they don't really exist; they only manifest from dharmadhatu to symbolize the deity's merit. The deity's body, and each piece of ornament and object all have

different symbolic meanings.

Simply put, be it the peaceful or wrathful mandala, it is inseparable from great emptiness and the luminous mind; each is a phenomenon of the luminous mind, the luminous mind is its essence. This is pure perception in its simplest form. Pure perception can eradicate attachment to the self of phenomena, such as attachment to the buddha field, buddha palace, and mandala. As attachment to the mandala also impedes liberation, it is necessary to know that the mandala does not exist either but merely manifests from emptiness and the luminous mind.

### THE THREE RESULTS OF GENERATION STAGE

#### *Purify Habitual Tendency of Samsara*

Habitual tendency of death is purified through the practice of the first samadhi. Habitual tendency of the intermediate state and alaya consciousness is purified through the practice of the second samadhi. Habitual tendency of all the stages in life besides intermediate state and death, that is, between rebirth and death, is purified through the practice of causal samadhi.

#### *Complete the Merit of Nirvana*

Upon reaching the highest state of the generation stage, one can see everything as the buddha field; this completes the merit of nirvana of the buddha.

#### *Help Ripen the Condition for Completion Stage*

Completion stage is to be practiced after completing the generation stage. Generation stage is like the preliminary practice of the completion stage; it lends assistance to the practice of the completion stage.

## The Completion Stage

—*the skillful means to realize emptiness*

### THE NEED TO EXPLAIN THE COMPLETION STAGE

On the surface, many terms related to tantra, and inner tantric practice in particular, seem quite mysterious and profound. Many people are also interested in finding out more about tantra, but don't know where to begin.

In view of the faculty and qualifications of most people, we don't think there is a need to understand the actual practice of the completion stage with marks for the time being. The reason being that this practice entails great effort, and is very complex and difficult for lay people who are busy and easily distracted. However, we can take up the completion stage practice without marks, which is part of Dzogchen and Mahamudra, after completing the preliminaries. Nevertheless, as students of Tantric Buddhism, we ought to know what tantra is about, what result is to be expected from tantric practice, what methodology is used to obtain this result, the reason such methodology is effective and the principle behind it, why this practice can swiftly lead to realization of emptiness, and so on. To answer these questions, a simple introduction to the completion stage is given here.

## HOW THE GENERATION AND COMPLETION STAGES DIFFER

There are many differences between the two. The generation stage is externally oriented; it is, for example, to visualize the surrounding world as the buddha's mandala, and the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space as the consorts of the Five Tathagatas, to make offerings, recite mantras, and so on. Whereas the completion stage regards everything in the outside world as projections of the channels, winds, and essences of the human body; having control over the body, one can also change the outside world at will without any visualization or mantra recitation. So, our body is the object for the practice of the completion stage.

The three yogas of Nyingmapa represent three different levels of view, which move ever closer to the nature of mind from one level to the next. Mahayoga is mainly about the generation stage, its object more outwardly directed; hence there are many discussions on visualization, mantra recitation, offering, etc. in its contents. Anuyoga is primarily about the completion stage, its object the vajra body which is inwardly focused; hence fewer practices about visualization and mantra recitation are included, its main purpose being to control the channels, winds, and essences of the body. It is the view of Anuyoga that practices of visualization, mudra, mantra recitation, offering, etc. as dictated in Mahayoga are all unnecessary detours. Atiyoga talks about the completion stage without marks, which holds that all things, be they external or internal, are manifestations of the mind. As long as the nature of mind is realized, none of the external or internal practices is needed, as they are all deviations. Therefore, the object of Atiyoga is neither the external practices of visualization, mantra recitation, making offering, etc. nor the practice of channels,

winds, and essences of the vajra body, but the luminous nature of mind.

However, people have very different cognitive capabilities, so Dzogchen and the completion stage with marks may not be appropriate for everyone. A person who is suited to practicing the generation stage should start with Mahayoga and gradually move on to the next phase. From this standpoint, no practice is a deviation; any practice that truly matches the practitioner's capacity can be an expedient path to realization.

## MAIN DISCUSSION

Our discussion focuses on four aspects of the completion stage: the constitution of vajra body, the practice, the principle of the practice, and the result.

### *The Constitution of Vajra Body*

To understand the completion stage, we must first know the constitution of vajra body. What is vajra body? It is just our body.

Why is it called vajra body?

As mentioned before, the tantric system in Buddhism is also known as Vajrayana, the Vajra Vehicle. Here, the word "vajra" denotes oneness.

What does oneness refer to? Normally, the sutric system maintains that sentient beings are not buddhas but ordinary beings encumbered with defilement, who can transform their minds into the wisdom of the buddha only through Dharma practice over numerous lives. But the view set forth in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, in particular that of tantra, is that ground and fruition are in fact one, that ground is fruition and fruition is ground. In other words, sentient beings are



buddhas and buddhas are sentient beings; the two are one and the same.

How can sentient beings be buddhas?

A sentient being, by definition, is the union of body and mind of an ordinary being. People who study the sutric system all know that the essence of mind is luminosity, so a sentient being's mind is already the wisdom of the buddha. But no clear explanation is given in sutra as to why a sentient being's body is the body of the buddha. On this question, sutra tends to be vague and offers no specific practice; whereas tantra gives a very specific and detailed explanation of both the principle and the practice for transformation or purification. In the tantric view, not only the mind of a sentient being is the wisdom of the buddha, but the body of a sentient being is also the body of the buddha. This is why it is called vajra body.

### *The Functions of Winds, Channels, and Essences*

In the constitution of vajra body, there is no need to discuss the human skin, muscles, bones, and brain as they are not related directly to practice. Winds, channels, and essences are, however, directly related to our practice. They serve two functions: first, before attaining realization or any training in practice, winds, channels, and essences give rise to cyclic existence; second, after attaining accomplishment, they give rise to all pure phenomena such as transcendent wisdom, pure realms, and so on. Therefore, the practice of the completion stage is undertaken from the perspectives of winds, channels, and essences.

### *Winds*

What are winds? There are many kinds of winds. The most visible, common kind is our breath. Based on the calculations of the *Kalacakra Tantra*, which comprise the basic data of all

celestial motions in the universe, including solar and lunar eclipses, it is determined that a healthy, middle-aged person breathes 21,600 times in a day (an inhalation and an exhalation are counted as one time.) This equates to 15 times per minute, which basically matches the data in modern medicine.

There are ten kinds of inner winds—five root winds and five branch winds. We cannot sense some of the inner winds, but they do exist. In relative truth, these winds can sustain our body. If something goes wrong with the winds or they are lost, our body will be affected to different degrees.

Tantra has discussed many signs of death, of which some appear physically, some in dreams, and others emotionally.

The reason for the different signs is this: when death is near, the first problem is the gradual weakening of the winds until it comes to a complete stop; we usually don't feel it, but because winds and mind are closely related, problems will begin to show up in some parts of the body, in dreams, or with our emotions. Although the time remaining until actual death may be long or short, these are all signs of death.

Inner winds at the deep level means movement of consciousness. Although there is no obvious movement in alaya consciousness, the mind which is born of alaya consciousness is subject to fluctuations—the arising, continuum, and ceasing of mind consciousness are also winds.

Winds can also be categorized into karmic winds and wisdom winds. Karmic winds denote the breathing of ordinary people. The airflow from breathing can cause us to develop all sorts of defilement or thoughts—either good, bad, or neutral (neither good nor bad). As all thoughts are closely related to breathing, normal breathing is described as karmic winds. Wisdom winds denote the part of breathing that produces wisdom.

### *Channels*

Tantra maintains that among the channels in the human body the most significant is the central channel; next are the left and right channels, along with 72,000 other channels of varied sizes derived from the three main channels that relate to Dharma practice; there are also channels that are not connected to practice. Then there are chakras located at the crown of the head, throat, heart, navel, and sacrum. According to different tantras, there are said to be five, six, or seven chakras.

The central channel can be divided into three types: the central channel of abiding, the dharmata, and genuine truth.

1. The central channel of abiding—It is the objectively existing central channel.

Why is it said to be objectively existing? Tantra explains very clearly that it is a kind of light, so that in many practices, such as the powa, the central channel is visualized as a brilliant tube. But the matter that forms the central channel is not like the blood, muscles, and bones that constitute the human body; it cannot be touched by a doctor's scalpel nor seen by x-rays.

2. The central channel of the dharmata—It is another central channel of subtler light located within the main central channel, which is also the real object of practice for the practitioner.

There are four characteristics: it doesn't occupy any space; it is a kind of light; when a person is alive, having winds, channels, and essences intact, it is existent, not non-existent; after a person dies, winds, channels, and essences having dissolved, it disappears, so it is not existent either.

The light related to the central channel is not the kind of visible or invisible light in physics; it cannot be found in any of the spectrums. Even though medicine and technology are highly developed today, and have made tremendous progress in the fields of human anatomy and physiology, cytology, and so on, they have yet to decipher the mysteries of the human brain,

let alone the physiological structure at the more profound level such as the central channel and the like. We should not think when referring to light, it must be the kind of light already discovered in science; or when referring to matter, it must be something the naked eye can see.

3. The central channel of genuine truth—It is in fact not a channel in the real sense but the nature of mind. It is called emptiness in Madhyamaka, luminous mind in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, and central channel in tantra.

Why are these three called central channel? The reason is that the central channel of abiding is located right in the center of the body, the central channel of the dharmata is inside the main central channel, and the central channel of genuine truth is neither existent nor non-existent, neither eternal nor nihilistic, free from any extreme.

Explanations of chakra are available in many tantric texts, so it is not discussed here for now.

### *Essences*

1. Essences of ultimate truth

Essences or drops are represented by a circle, symbolizing freedom from all boundaries. Unlike a triangle, square, and pentagon, a circle does not have edges and vertices. Hence, it is used to represent the nature of mind, luminous awareness, which is free of fabrications and boundaries. This is the essences of ultimate truth.

Wisdom winds, the central channel of genuine truth, and the essences of ultimate truth all represent luminous mind, the tathāgatagarbha. Therefore, winds, channels, and essences at the most profound level all point to luminous mind, the origin of all phenomena. The origin of all winds, channels, and essences is the luminous mind. From the luminous mind, winds, channels, essences, buddha fields, and impure samsara arise.

## 2. Essences of relative truth

There are many essences in our chakras, which serve as the foundation that sustains human life, health, thoughts, etc.

Located at the heart position in the central channel of the dharmata there is one drop called the essence of five elements, that is, the essence of earth, water, wind, fire, and space. Within this essence is the essence of mind—the tathāgatagarbha.

Winds, channels, and essences are important components of the human body; the fundamental essence of all winds, channels, and essences is the tathāgatagarbha.

### *The Practice of the Completion Stage*

When the practice of the generation stage reaches a very mature state, it becomes the practice of the completion stage. Hence, the generation stage is equivalent to the preliminary practice of the completion stage. In Vajrayana, the generation stage is the main practice on the path of accumulation; the practice of the completion stage only begins after one is on the path of preparation.

As the main practice methodology is explained extensively in many tantric texts, it will not be discussed here.

Simply speaking, from the medical point of view, be it Tibetan, Western, or Chinese medicine, we breathe by way of the lungs, windpipe, nostrils, and mouth. In tantra, besides normal breathing, the breath that is still moving in the left and right channels before entering the central channel is called karmic wind. Karmic winds can cause infinite discursive thoughts to arise, making it impossible for us to obtain peace of mind. Sentient beings in the desire realm who have not undertaken any meditation practice are constantly afflicted by discursive thoughts and karmic winds.

In the meditation of the Theravada tradition and non-

Buddhist schools, winds and mind are also closely related. For the non-Buddhist meditators, upon reaching the fourth dhyana, all discursive thoughts are gone, and so is the breathing. By then, life is no longer sustained by breathing but the power of meditation instead.

The practices such as the Six Yogas of Naropa of the Kagyu school, the five stages of Guhyasamaja Tantra of the Gelug school, Kalacakra Six-Session Guruyoga of the Jonang school, and Anuyoga of the Nyingma school are all classified as the completion stage with marks, that is, the practice of winds, channels, and essences.

With minor differences aside, these practices are the same for the most part. Through these practices, the winds in the left and right channels can flow into the central channel and become wisdom winds. Once karmic winds are reduced or extinguished altogether, discursive thoughts dissolve, and wisdom arises in their place. This is because luminosity naturally manifests when winds and consciousness disappear from the central channel.

In addition, the winds in the left and right channels can also enter the central channel under three circumstances: first, when the accumulation of merit has grown to a certain level, namely, when one has attained the state of the first ground bodhisattva. Due to the accumulation of merit through eons, the winds will enter the central channel, attaining realization of emptiness even if a person has never undertaken the practice of winds, channels, and essences; second, when one goes into deep sleep. This is where a trained practitioner can perceive luminosity in the dream state while the inexperienced cannot; third, when one dies. Even absent the practice of winds, channels, and essences, the karmic winds of the dead can enter deep into the central channel, much more so than during sleep; thus not only luminosity but also the mandala of the buddhas will appear in the bardo.

In fact, the process from the waking state to sleep and to dream again is almost the same as that from death to the unconscious state and to the bardo. If one cannot perceive luminosity while dreaming, one cannot recognize ground luminosity, peaceful and wrathful deities in death either.

Such are the processes and principles underlying life's activities. There are natural laws that regulate the activities of all internal and external matter, like the various activities of the celestial body—the Big Bang, the formation, merger, and disintegration of planets, the creation of nebulas, and so on.

For practitioners, the rules that govern the mind's activities present a very important window of opportunity to perceive or recognize luminosity through practice and constant training. This ultimate goal is exactly the same as what the practitioners of sutra hope to achieve by accumulating immeasurable merit and wisdom over three asamkhyeya kalpas. All the practices in sutra and tantra have this one goal. Nevertheless, it still requires tremendous effort to practice the completion stage; only those who have diligence and perseverance can hope to succeed.

### ***The Principle of the Completion Stage***

Normally we think of the central channel as a bamboo stick and the winds as our breath. When the central channel into which the winds flow resembles a bamboo stick or some sort of pipe, how can realization of emptiness be possible?

Actually, when visualizing the central channel, sometimes we visualize a rather normal-sized channel, and other times an exceptionally large channel. This can help the winds enter the central channel. But the key is to have the ever changing, non-stop flow of discursive thoughts and mental activities dissolve into the central channel of the dharmata and genuine truth—into luminous awareness that is the nature of mind, allowing

the inherent luminosity to manifest itself. This is the samadhi attained by bodhisattvas having arrived at the first bhumi.

It is also said in the chapter “Rely on Wisdom, not on Consciousness” in *The Four Reliances* that if mental activities do not stop, they will conceal the nature of mind, and prevent us from ever seeing its true reality. Only when the sixth consciousness or all eight consciousnesses stop operating completely can there be a chance to truly see the nature of mind.

Such is the principle, but sutra does not have this kind of practice. Although there are methods in tantra, they are not without some risks. That is, if the winds enter not the central channel of the dharmata but the central channel of abiding (life channel), it will cause the practitioner to go mad. Whereas if the winds enter the central channel of the dharmata, not only will this problem not arise, it will also “activate” the essences of the five elements in this channel, resulting in the manifestation of myriad pure realms.

The main obstacle that prevents us from seeing any pure realms now is the existence of consciousness (not just the sixth consciousness but all eight consciousnesses). The reason that buddha fields can be seen in the intermediate state is because for a brief interval all conscious activities come to a full stop. Once consciousness stops working, there is no more blockage; the buddha fields emanated from luminosity will naturally appear.

Buddha fields or mandalas can also be seen upon obtainment of Dzogchen realization and while abiding in that state; what one sees at this point is exactly the same as that in the bardo. Here, it is not what is perceived with the eyes but the practitioner's own cognition, as all these are phenomena emanated from the nature of mind, just like the Zen saying “only the person drinking the water knows it is cold or hot.” To

Dzogchen practitioners, this state is real, certain, and ordinary, just as eating can fill up an empty stomach; whereas to non-practitioners, it simply sounds too ridiculous and mysterious to apprehend.

It is said in the *Lankavatara Sutra*: “The tathāgatagarbha, intrinsically pure, permanent, and unchanging, adorned with thirty-two excellent signs, abides in all sentient beings.” Similar statements are also found in many other sutric texts. How is it possible that sentient beings have thirty-two excellent signs in their minds? Can there be a buddha’s body in the minds of sentient beings? That’s not what the sutra suggests. The essence of sentient beings’ minds is the tathāgatagarbha; although the tathāgatagarbha is formless and without color, it is wherefrom the mandalas can emanate.

Practitioners of sutra must first learn to use many theories in logic to refute their prior misconceptions and convince themselves of the idea of emptiness. Afterwards, they need to dedicate themselves to the hearing, contemplation, and meditation of the Dharma as well as accumulating merit and wisdom from the practice of the six paramitas throughout numerous lives. This way they will be able to discern the profundity of the pure mandala.

The tantric practice of the completion stage can stop mental activities forcibly—by visualizing the winds entering the central channel, consciousness is rendered inoperable and the nature of mind allowed to manifest. In addition, the tantric practice of Dzogchen, which does not rely on the practice of winds, channels, and essences nor logical reasoning, can also stop mental activities and bring about realization of emptiness with the guru’s blessing and pith instructions; however, the practitioner must have first accrued sufficient merit and wisdom such as bodhicitta.

Of course, it will not do if the pith instructions are missing.

When ordinary people go into deep sleep every night, part of their mental activities also stop, but that’s all; they cannot realize the nature of mind, nor experience even normal sense perception. It is a state of complete unconsciousness.

In Ch’an Buddhism, there are practices for sudden and gradual enlightenment. The method of the sudden school is a bit like that of Dzogchen or Mahamudra—neither logic reasoning nor practices of winds, channels, and essences are applied; it is just to remain free of thought and abide in calmness. By way of the samatha practice and the guru’s pith instructions, enlightenment can ultimately be reached.

Coarse defilements like greed, aversion, delusion, and so on can be eliminated through practice of the white skeleton meditation or bodhicitta, but alaya consciousness which is most subtle is very difficult to stop. When a wall collapses, the images drawn on the wall will also be destroyed. Likewise, once the alaya consciousness ceases to function completely, all the virtues and non-virtues stored in the alaya consciousness, which are tainted phenomena, will vanish as well.

The practices of winds, channels, and essences are quite complex and pose a certain degree of difficulty, so the most suitable practice for us should be the completion stage without marks. The completion stage without marks is Dzogchen, but to practice Dzogchen, the completion of the preliminaries and the blessing of a qualified vajra master are first required.

There is also a vajra body practice which is unique to Vajrayana. The practice is to transform an ordinary body into a vajra body or illusory body, which is immaterial and unreal like a dream.

From the standpoint of emptiness, all phenomena are real to ordinary people; in the path of accumulation, emptiness is understood still at a theoretical level; in the path of preparation, one is able to experience emptiness albeit indistinctly; after

reaching the first ground of the bodhisatta, one finally encounters true emptiness.

From the standpoint of phenomena, all appearances are impure at the level of ordinary people. When practicing the generation stage in the path of accumulation, pure phenomena are the result of visualizing the deities, a kind of illusion belonging to the beginning stage of the illusory body, still very raw and unnatural, only serving as a medium for the connection between the impure illusions of ordinary people and the ultimate true reality of mind. When undertaking the practice of winds, channels, and essences of the completion stage in the path of preparation, many normally unseen phenomena will appear once the winds enter the central channel. If one can visualize these phenomena as the buddha fields and oneself as the deity, such as Vajrasattva and the like, pure phenomena will instantly manifest. These phenomena are very stable, unlike those in the generation stage, but they are also the function of the winds, deliberately constructed through visualizations, hence not the real deity. The deity's body that manifests in the bardo and in tögal of the Dzogchen practice is the real vajra body, not a fabrication of any kind, but a naturally manifested phenomenon of the luminous mind. There are no impure or fabricated pure phenomena here other than the pure realms of the Five Tathagatas.

Simply put, in terms of emptiness, the path of accumulation, preparation, and seeing move closer and closer to the true nature of mind, while pure phenomena also manifest step by step from being fabricated to being genuine until finally the buddha fields really appear. When impure and fabricated pure phenomena all disappear with only the buddha fields remaining, it is the complete attainment of buddhahood, the actualization of the sambhogakaya.

There is no such practice of sambhogakaya in sutra.

The view of sutra is the accumulation of wisdom can result in dharmakaya and the accrual of merit can produce sambhogakaya. But the exact method to obtain these results is rather abstract. Tantra however is very specific in its methodology, with corresponding practices for the purification of body and mind included.

### *The Result of the Completion Stage*

The result of the completion stage is attaining buddhahood. Absent the practice of the completion stage, one can only gain worldly accomplishment with the practice of the generation stage. Buddhahood is possible only through the union of the generation and completion stage. To achieve supramundane accomplishment, one must rely on the completion stage

Although some of the tantric texts claim that the state of buddhahood in sutra is not the same as in tantra, it is just an opinion; in fact, there is no difference between the two whatsoever. The resultant state attained through practice in sutra is also a buddha in tantra, and vice versa. The essence of the afflictive and cognitive hindrances is consciousness, so when all eight consciousnesses stop to function, naturally the two hindrances are also completely eradicated. Everybody recognizes eliminating both hindrances represents the attainment of buddhahood.

The most crucial part of this overall discussion is the principle of the completion stage. Knowing the principle, we will gain confidence in the practice, eventually realize emptiness, and in the end attain complete enlightenment.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is best that busy people today take up the practice of

Dzogchen. Even though Dzogchen is for people of superior capacity, we can still try to elevate ourselves to that level, and the way to do that is by practicing the preliminaries. Through hearing and contemplating the Dharma, and the practice of the preliminaries, an ordinary person who knows nothing about karma, let alone renunciation and bodhicitta, can also turn into someone of superior capacity. A person who has cultivated renunciation and bodhicitta after completing the preliminaries and developed great faith in tantra is said to have superior capacity. Such a person has a chance of succeeding in the Dzogchen practice. Whether we can be someone of superior capacity is all up to us. However, to practice Dzogchen prematurely would not only fail to bring any benefit but also run the risk of losing one's faith in the practice. Therefore, make effort to practice the preliminaries first.

Nowadays, there are all sorts of books on tantric practice in the bookstores, most of which are written or translated by people who have neither lineage nor knowledge of the subject. Not knowing the real meaning of the tantric teachings, they are apt to misinterpret the contents and cause readers to develop the wrong view, even slander Vajrayana. This would result in very serious negative karma. Therefore, people who intend to learn Vajrayana must choose the authentic tantric texts to read as well as follow the explanations and instructions from a qualified vajra master. To undertake self-taught tantric practice by simply reading a few books is even worse as it will surely cause problems. One is qualified to practice Vajrayana only after receiving empowerment and oral transmissions.

## How to Receive Empowerment

After generating bodhicitta in tantra and receiving an empowerment, a person enters the door to tantric practice.

Bodhicitta is defined differently in tantra and sutra. Bodhicitta in sutra is the aspiration to attain buddhahood for the benefit of sentient beings through methods in sutra, but buddhahood is attained after three asamkhyeya kalpas. Bodhicitta in tantra is the aspiration to attain buddhahood in this lifetime for the benefit of sentient beings through methods in tantra. If that is not possible, one should attain buddhahood during bardo; if that is also not possible, one should vow to actualize buddhahood in the next life.

It is said in tantra a practitioner who upholds the tantric precepts will attain enlightenment no later than seven lifetimes.

A person who generates bodhicitta in tantra and takes empowerment the first time is formally a Vajrayana practitioner. Thereafter, he is not only a Buddhist but also a person on the path of liberation, not only a person on the path of liberation but also a person on the Mahayana path of liberation, not only a person on the Mahayana path of liberation but also a person on the Vajrayana path.

Hence, an empowerment is very important in Vajrayana practice. A person who has not received empowerment is not permitted to listen to and undertake the actual tantric practices. If one intends to practice Vajrayana, the first step must be to

receive an empowerment.

Presently, however, there are two problems with empowerments:

First, practitioners do not know what qualifications the person conferring the empowerment and the person receiving the empowerment should possess, nor what is expected of them prior to and during empowerment. If the vajra master conferring the empowerment is not qualified, the empowerment will not be complete; it may even cause the person at the other end not to receive it. If the vajra master meets the necessary requirements, the person still cannot receive the empowerment if he himself is not qualified.

Second, practitioners do not know what is expected of them after the empowerment. Hence, they violate the tantric vows soon after receiving the empowerment. Basically, the tantric precepts and corresponding liturgies are given during empowerment; they are to be upheld after the ceremony. But many who have received empowerment over the years actually do not know taking empowerment indicates the acceptance of tantric precepts; not realizing these precepts have to be followed, they do not know they have violated the precepts, nor do they know how to repent. This is very irresponsible. We are careful about observing the five basic lay precepts, yet unconcerned with upholding the tantric precepts which, if violated, constitutes a far more serious transgression.

Here, I would like to remind everyone that, after the empowerment, we must study the fourteen root tantric precepts or the precepts that correspond with the empowerment, and keep our vows.

Of course, it is not essential to practice tantra to be a Buddhist; if we choose Pure Land or Ch'an in Chinese Buddhism, we do not need to receive an empowerment nor worry about breaking the tantric precepts. However, if we

intend to practice tantra, it is necessary to be well informed. A discussion on empowerment can be found in the chapter "Vajra Master and Empowerment." This topic shall be further developed below.

## THE PURPOSE OF EMPOWERMENT

The Sanskrit term *abhiṣeka* for empowerment, or initiation, has two kinds of meaning. One is to infuse. Our buddha nature does not require an infusion from outside, since it is naturally present, but on the surface an empowerment instills a certain power that awakens the buddha nature. The other is to destroy, to eradicate our desire, anger, delusion, and other obscurations.

### *Awakening the Buddha Nature*

The ground (as in ground, path, and fruition expounded in tantra) is inherent in every sentient being. From the standpoint of tantra, the essence of our five poisons—desire, anger, delusion, arrogance, and doubt—is the fivefold wisdom of the five Buddha-families. Actually, the fivefold wisdom of the buddha and the five Buddha-families are one and the same. The fivefold wisdom of the buddha is the essence of the five Buddha-families. The five types of wisdom are also called the five Buddha-families; the five Buddha-families are the manifestation of the five types of wisdom. The fivefold wisdom is the state of buddhahood; to the bodhisattvas, this wisdom manifests as the five Buddha-families.

The five Buddha-families or five types of wisdom are the underlying nature of our mind. Prior to studying Buddhism and receiving an empowerment, our buddha nature is essentially dormant. The purpose of empowerment is to awaken our buddha nature and bring it into full play. Of course, at the



fundamental level, the unconditioned buddha nature is beyond activation, but in terms of phenomena, the activation process exists.

There are three kinds of awakening:

At the highest level, one attains buddhahood immediately upon receiving an empowerment; the state of buddhahood is reached instantly without having to practice on the paths of seeing and meditation. But this is extremely rare, since there are only one or two such examples of Indian siddhas in the history of Vajrayana Buddhism. In the history of Tibetan Buddhism, there are instances of sudden enlightenment but not of buddhahood.

At the intermediate level, one attains sudden enlightenment upon receiving an empowerment. In any initiation of Dzogchen, the Dzogchen view is explained. Realization is not possible if one does not understand the language and translation is not available. However, if the conditions are right—the translation is available and relatively accurate, the vajra master possesses the merit, and the disciple is spiritually mature, that is, he has unwavering faith in tantra and the Three Jewels, and has already completed the outer and inner preliminaries—it is possible for a person, given the blessing of the vajra master, to attain enlightenment upon receiving an empowerment, especially the precious word empowerment, the fourth level and the highest empowerment in tantra. Actually, in Chinese Buddhism, there are people who attained sudden enlightenment under special circumstances; for instance, the sixth patriarch Hui Neng became enlightened when the fifth patriarch explained a verse in the *Diamond Sutra* to him. But this kind of realization is only considered the early stage of enlightenment, not buddhahood. Within the five paths to liberation in sutra and tantra, it is part of the path of preparation, not even the first bhumi level on the path of seeing, let alone the eighth or tenth bhumi.

At the lowest level, one attains neither buddhahood nor enlightenment; one may not even feel anything special. However, the practice of the vajra master, the power of the initiation, and the visualization practice of the disciple come together and serve as conditions that can activate the latent buddha nature in the person's mind, and propel him or her swiftly toward eventual enlightenment.

### ***Granting Permission***

If a person practices tantra without first receiving an empowerment, nothing of substance will come of it. Not only that, he will be committing a transgression of stealing the Dharma by not observing the rules.

After the empowerment, the practitioner has the right to study the tantric texts, undertake the practice, recite the deity mantras, and propagate tantra. Naturally, there are several levels of empowerment; some initiations allow the person to practice but not expound the teachings, others allow the person to practice as well as propagate the teachings.

## **THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR EMPOWERMENT**

### ***Requirements of a Vajra Master***

The person granting the empowerment is called a vajra master. The scriptures, especially tantric writings, clearly prescribe many qualifications of the vajra master; everyone can refer to the Dzogchen texts such as Longchenpa's *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind* and *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. In tantra, a person can take an empowerment only from a qualified master; otherwise, receiving the empowerment is the same as not receiving it.

To be a vajra master, there are also special requirements:

1. One must not have violated the tantric precepts, resulting in the loss or contamination of the essence of the vows.

2. One must have achieved meditative concentration in the generation stage and completion stage practices, although a high level of accomplishment, like the first bhumi and up, is not necessarily required.

3. One must have successfully completed the practice of the main deity of the empowerment in rigorous retreat. Although how much time should be devoted to the practice is not stipulated, one must have perfected the recitation of the deity mantra in strict compliance with the practice.

4. One must have a good command of the initiation liturgy from beginning to end.

To confer an empowerment, it is essential for the vajra master to satisfy these four conditions; a person cannot otherwise receive the empowerment.

Nowadays, self-proclaimed living buddhas, khenpos, accomplished masters, yogis, and dakinis abound everywhere; a person who cannot discern true from false can easily be fooled. When the great master Atisha went to Tibet, it was a period of turmoil following the persecution of Buddhism in the country (during the persecution, Tibetan monks and nuns were defrocked; monastics were nowhere to be seen. But many lay tantric practitioners kept a low profile, preserved the monastic precepts and traditions, and subsequently propagated the teachings in their entirety. If not for them, there would be no Tibetan Buddhism today). Many Indian so-called masters and adepts also went to Tibet at the same time, but primarily because there was plenty of gold in Tibet. Some absconded with money; others transmitted uncanonical teachings that left a negative influence on many practitioners.

When Atisha was about to enter parinirvana, he repeatedly exhorted: “Follow the teachings in the sutras; do not seek

teachings from Indians who look for gold.” Sakyamuni Buddha also said to his disciples in his final moment: “Follow the precepts.” Similarly, we should rely on the precepts and the written words in the sutras, even though not all self-proclaimed living buddhas and khenpos are swindlers. When we pass judgment on monastics and practitioners in general, we are committing a transgression. If we do not seek the teachings, there is no reason to judge or examine them. We ought instead to respect all who wear the monastic robes, whether they keep the essence of the precepts intact or not; this is one of the requirements in taking refuge. However, if we intend to receive empowerment or teachings from a person, we must first undertake a critical examination of the person.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, a person is required to observe a master for a period of twelve years before taking refuge with him. What if we do not have that much time? Personally, I would advise students to follow those recognized masters from the older generation in Tibet, who have gone through much hardship and are highly accomplished in their practice as a result. This is not to imply there are no young masters around, but with no way of evaluating the person, it would be safer to follow my recommendation.

Presently, there are people who use Vajrayana Buddhism as an excuse to eat meat, drink alcohol, extort money, and break up other people’s families; these are all signs of a degenerate time. In Tibetan Buddhism and in Chinese Buddhism as well, some people also pass themselves off as members of the monastic community. These undesirable elements exist in any community, so we must be very careful! If someone professes to have supernatural power, and claims he has a special past connection with a person and that person can attain liberation by undertaking the yab-yum practice with him, he is definitely a fake. At the same time, it should be very clear to us this is

a problem with the individual, not with tantra. If we allow ourselves to be deceived so easily, it is then our own problem. Tantra is nothing like this; in fact, it strongly opposes these practices. It is said in tantric literature that actions taken in the name of tantra such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying are far more serious than ordinary actions of like kind!

Hence, prior to examining whether a master possesses the necessary qualifications, a person must not blindly receive an empowerment; he could otherwise regret it for life. Tantric rules cannot be disregarded or taken lightly.

### ***Requirements of a Disciple***

1. Renunciation. If the purpose of studying Buddhism is only to realize long life, wealth, and status, one cannot receive empowerment at all. Because tantra is established on the basis of bodhisattva and pratimoksha vows; bodhisattva vows are established on the basis of bodhicitta; pratimoksha vows are established on the basis of renunciation. If any one factor is missing, our objective cannot be achieved.

2. Bodhicitta. Tantra is firstly Mahayana Buddhism. Without bodhicitta, it cannot be called tantra, nor can emptiness be realized.

3. Faith in the tantric teachings. Even with renunciation and bodhicitta, it is best to defer the empowerment if confidence in the tantric teachings is absent. It is safer to take empowerment after strong faith is generated in tantra.

4. Comprehension of the teachings in the initiation and ability to visualize the deity and mandala during the initiation.

5. Ability to uphold the tantric precepts after the empowerment. The fourteen root vows in Vajrayana Buddhism are explained in this book and other books on the precepts. Prior to empowerment, one should understand these precepts

and examine whether they can be upheld. If a person feels certain he can maintain the vows, he can receive empowerment; otherwise, he should not consider it.

Among the fourteen root vows, there is not one that cannot be completely upheld. Even the precept which is relatively easy to break that forbids Vajrayana practitioners from condemning or physically harming their fellow brothers and sisters. When an occasional confrontation between fellow practitioners leads to unpleasant words, a person can instantly apologize, vow to mend his way, and purify the transgression through repentance. The Buddha laid down the precepts on the premise and certainty these precepts could be followed by ordinary people. Generally speaking, if a person has deep faith in tantra and genuine desire for the teachings, he is more likely to maintain the vows without breaking them.

A person who has these five prerequisites is deemed a worthy Dharma vessel for tantra and thus qualified to receive the tantric precepts and initiations.

## **CATEGORIES OF EMPOWERMENT**

### ***Ground, Path, Fruition***

The first empowerment in a person's life is called the ground or causal initiation. After the first empowerment is the path initiation which is given either by the vajra master or received through one's own Guru Yoga practice. The final empowerment is given by the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions, when the person is at the tenth bhumi just prior to entering the eleventh bhumi; it is called the fruition or initiation of the resultant state. These phases of empowerment are also discussed in the sutras.

From our standpoint, the causal initiation is the most

important of the three phases of empowerment. This is because in order to receive an authentic and standard causal initiation, a person must be able to find a vajra master endowed with merit. The path initiation can be received through one's own practice, so the effect is the same with or without a vajra master. As for the initiation of the resultant state, there is even less reason for us to worry.

### ***Four Levels of Empowerment***

In Tangmi (Tang Dynasty Esoterica) and Shingon Buddhism, or outer tantra, the empowerment conferred is the first level only. In Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet, the empowerment consists of four different levels; it is called inner tantra because of the more profound nature of this type of empowerment.

The view, practice, and empowerment in outer tantra lie somewhere between sutra and inner tantra. The higher levels of empowerment do not appear in outer tantra because sentient beings are not as advanced spiritually. When practitioners of sutra mature spiritually, they can first practice outer tantra, then inner tantra. If the preliminaries are completed successfully, practitioners can also reach a level of maturity which allows them to skip outer tantra, and go directly to inner tantra. The empowerments that are usually given, such as Vajrasattva, Amitabha, Chenrezig, and Vairocana, belong to outer tantra; the empowerments that comprise four different levels belong to inner tantra.

#### 1. The first level of empowerment is the vase initiation.

The first function of the vase initiation is to give the disciple permission to listen to, study, and practice the tantras and commentaries related to the generation stage. The second function is to transform the channels of the body and our physical body into the buddha body. Those who do not attain

realization upon receiving the empowerment can rely on the power conferred during initiation and the practice of the generation stage to achieve the transformation swiftly. The third function is to purify the negative karma produced by our body. The fourth function is to generate the cause for attaining the nirmanakaya, one of the four bodies of the Buddha, and bring it to maturity.

Certainly, when speaking of the processes of transforming, purifying, and ripening, it pertains to only what is on the surface. Actually, none of these is necessary since the nature of all phenomena is already pure. Nevertheless, the appearance is after all impure and immature; hence the processes need to take place.

2. The second level of empowerment is the secret initiation. Actually, there is nothing secret about it; it is only labeled as such.

The first function of the secret initiation is to give the disciple permission to listen, study, and practice the tantras and treatises related to the elementary completion stage (also including the generation stage above). The second function is to allow those who do not attain realization upon receiving empowerment to rely on the power conferred during initiation and the practice of the generation and completion stage to ripen their speech quickly and transform it into the speech of the Buddha. It is also to eliminate any obstruction of the wind-energies (tantra maintains that the winds, channels, and essences that make up the body are impure at the superficial level and can be transformed through practices of the generation and completion stage into pure form). The third function is to purify the negative karma produced by our speech. The fourth function is to generate the cause for attaining the sambhogakaya and bring it quickly to fruition.

3. The third level of empowerment is the wisdom-

knowledge initiation. This is not to say there is wisdom only in this empowerment; the first two empowerments also include elements of wisdom, but this level contains the highest wisdom, the wisdom of Dzogchen.

The first function of the wisdom-knowledge initiation is to give the disciple permission to listen to, study, and practice the tantras and treatises related to the final completion stage. The completion stage is divided into two parts: the initial stage can be practiced after the second initiation is granted; the high level completion stage like the Kalacakra can only be practiced after the third initiation is granted. The second function is to transform the essences (tiklé) of the body and our mind into the buddha wisdom. Those who do not gain realization upon receiving empowerment rely on the power conferred during initiation and the practice of the generation and completion stage to ripen the mind swiftly and transform it into the wisdom of the buddha. The third function is to purify the negative karma produced by our mind. The fourth function is to generate the cause for attaining the dharmakaya and bring it to maturity.

4. The fourth and highest level of empowerment is the precious word initiation, which is also the Dzogchen initiation. This empowerment contains not only the ultimate level in the inner tantras, the state of Dzogchen, but also the entire body of teachings in tantra.

The first function of the word initiation is to give the disciple permission to listen to, study, and practice the tantras and treatises related to the initial stage of Dzogchen, such as the *Guhya garbha Tantra*, but not all the practices in Dzogchen. In the Nyingma tradition, it is essential to receive Dzogchen's own empowerment to undertake the practice. The second function is to generate the cause for quickly attaining the svabhavikakaya. The dharmakaya and the svabhavikakaya are two aspects of the buddha's extraordinary merit; the clear light aspect is the

dharmakaya, the emptiness aspect is the svabhavikakaya. The third function is to eliminate the overall obstruction of the winds, channels, and essences of the subtle body, including the afflictive and cognitive hindrances at the subtlest level. The fourth function is to purify the negative karma in the alaya consciousness produced collectively by our body, speech, and mind.

The four empowerments have their respective functions; in the past, tantric practitioners in Tibet would carefully consider their circumstance prior to receiving empowerment. They would seek only that initiation that corresponded with their own capacity. Nowadays, tantric practice is very common in Tibet, so the four initiations are usually conferred at the same time whenever the empowerment ceremony is conducted, regardless of the suitability or readiness of the individual's capacity. This practice deserves to be reviewed and deliberated on.

Over and above these empowerments, there is also a vajra master initiation. This is given to a disciple who after receiving the four empowerments has the ability to assume the responsibility of a vajra master. Only after receiving this empowerment can the person grant empowerment to others and transmit the tantric teachings. In the past, this initiation would not be conducted in the open. However, a person who has received the vajra master initiation must still examine whether or not he himself is qualified to grant empowerment and expound the teachings. This is utmost in importance.

## HOW TO RECEIVE EMPOWERMENT

### *Preparing for Empowerment*

To prepare for the empowerment, one must:

1. Understand what is involved in receiving an empo-

werment.

2. Practice the preliminaries. This includes the four outer preliminaries (precious human birth, impermanence, etc.) and the inner preliminaries (taking refuge, generating bodhicitta, etc.). Empowerment is required to practice Vajrasattva and Guru Yoga; although not essential, it is best if empowerment is also conferred for the Mandala Offering practice.

### *Entering the Mandala*

An initiation given in Tibetan should be translated; practitioners would otherwise not know how to attain a proper empowerment. That is unless the master is highly accomplished and can through his inconceivable power ensure the empowerment is received. Additionally, there are steps to be followed:

1. At the ceremonial site prior to the empowerment, everyone should recite the Hundred Syllable Mantra together to purify negative karma.

2. Offer a mandala if there is one; otherwise visualize offering the mandala and other objects like flowers, water, and incense. In Tibet, it is customary to present a khata along with other objects. Imagine these encompassing all the wondrous offerings in the one billion world-system and all our virtuous roots in the past, present, and future, and visualize offering them to the vajra master conferring the empowerment.

3. During the course of empowerment, the refuge vows, bodhisattva precepts, and tantric precepts are explained; in front of the vajra master, pledge to uphold the refuge vows.

4. Next take the bodhisattva vows.

5. Then take the tantric vows that correspond to the empowerment. At this time, the attendees are given water to drink which represents the pledge to uphold the tantric vows.

6. Ask the vajra master to confer the empowerment. This sequence is explained in the liturgy and must be completed by everyone. It is also the tradition in sutra to grant transmission only to a person who accepts the teachings, not to someone who does not. This step implies the participant has faith in the practice and is willing to accept it.

7. Request permission from the vajra master to enter the mandala. One must complete these procedures which are required of all empowerments, even if translation is not given.

8. To know one's yidam, each person is given a flower during the empowerment; one first prays in front of a flower tray which represents the mandala, then throws the flower into the tray. Whichever deity the flower lands on is one's yidam.

9. After the yidam is identified, imagine welcoming the deity to descend from the buddha field into your heart. With the flower tray placed on your head, visualize the yidam dissolving in your heart and becoming one with you.

10. During the empowerment, each person's eyes are covered with a red cloth; after a while the cloth is untied to allow the participants to see the mandala. The implication here is that prior to studying tantra, we perceive all appearances to be impure; it is likened to looking at the world through colored eyeglasses and not seeing its true reality, so a piece of cloth is used to cover the eyes. When the cloth is untied, the vajra master introduces the mandala to the recipients of empowerment. The main point is to introduce the five Buddha-families in the mandala, which represent the manifestations of the five wisdoms. This is to inculcate an understanding that the entire world is also pure like the mandala of the buddhas. Although on the surface, the mandala may appear as a configuration made from colored sand, a hand-painted thangka, or a picture, all these forms represent the mandala of the five Buddha-families. The pure buddha field is the original face of this world.

11. To introduce the mandala, the vajra master will use a vajra scepter to point to the palaces and deities in the mandala, and one by one, give an explanation.

### *Visualization Methods*

The visualization methods are basically not explained to people who have not received empowerment. However, if they are not first explained, a person will not know the methods; not knowing the methods, he cannot receive the empowerment, nor will he ever be able to receive it. Of course, teaching the methods to a person who has faith in tantra should not be a problem either, especially when there is nothing in the methods that must be kept secret.

### *Vase Initiation*

Most of the vase initiations can be classified into seven types:

1. Water empowerment of Aksobhya—this initiation is generally conferred with a vase containing nectar. The person receiving the empowerment should visualize the vase as the palace of the five Buddha-families, namely the mandala of all the buddhas in the inner tantras—the shape resembles the mandala at Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Institute. Then visualize the five Buddha-families inside the vase; the deities, like ice, subsequently melt away and become water in the vase. During the initiation, a recipient is generally required to drink the water in the vase; at this point, the recipient should imagine the five Buddha-families have dissolved into water with which one is bathed. The aggregate of consciousness of an impure ordinary person, whose nature is actually the five Buddha-families, is thus purified and manifests as Aksobhya Buddha; space amongst the five elements is purified and manifests as

the female buddha Vajra Datvishvari; anger amongst the five poisons is purified and manifests as mirror-like wisdom.

2. Crown empowerment of Ratnasambhava—visualize the crown as Ratnasambhava Buddha. When the vajra master places the crown on the disciple's head, the disciple should visualize: the aggregate of feeling is purified and manifests as Ratnasambhava Buddha; water is purified and manifests as the female buddha Mamaki; arrogance is purified and manifests as the wisdom of equality.

3. Vajra empowerment of Amitabha—when the vajra master places the vajra scepter in the disciple's right hand, the disciple should visualize: the aggregate of perception is purified and manifests as Amitabha Buddha; fire is purified and manifests as the female buddha Pandaravasini; desire is purified and manifests as the wisdom of discernment.

4. Bell empowerment of Amoghasiddhi—when the vajra master places the bell in the disciple's left hand, the disciple should visualize: the aggregate of volition is purified and manifests as Amoghasiddhi Buddha; wind is purified and manifests as the female buddha Samayatara; jealousy is purified and manifests as all-accomplishing wisdom.

5. Name empowerment of Vairocana—when the vajra master bestows a name that corresponds to the yidam, the disciple should visualize: the aggregate of form is purified and manifests as Vairocana Buddha; earth is purified and manifests as the female buddha Lochana; ignorance is purified and manifests as the wisdom of dharmadhatu.

6. Vajra practice empowerment—the vajra master places the vajra and bell, symbols of the oneness of wisdom and skillful means, in the disciple's hands and urges the disciple to undertake the tantric practice that realizes the inseparability of dharmadhatu and wisdom.

The six empowerments above are given to the disciple.

7. Vajra master empowerment—this empowerment is conferred to a special group of people who possess the faculties to free sentient beings from samsara.

After receiving these empowerments, we can quickly actualize the five Buddha-families; that is, the five Buddha-families and our five aggregates become one and the same. Whether it is negative karma of the body or obstruction of the channels, all are purified and brought to maturity. At the same time, the seed of the nirmanakaya is attained.

Although there are some differences in the empowerments, most of the vase empowerments follow this pattern of visualization. In receiving an empowerment in the future, even without translation, you can visualize this way; it is otherwise very difficult to receive an empowerment if you merely drink water from the vase and do not understand anything.

### *Secret Initiation*

The secret initiation is usually conferred with a kapala containing nectar. When receiving empowerment, visualize the nectar first filling the throat chakra, then spreading to the heart, next to the navel, finally to every chakra and every part of the body, and visualize having realized the nature of mind. Although in appearance the kapala is only filled with water mixed with herbs, it symbolizes realization of the second level of empowerment. Thus, at the time of drinking the nectar, visualize you have realized emptiness through the power of the initiation, eradicated the obscurations of speech, and implanted the seed of the sambhogakaya. The second empowerment can be received as you drink and visualize at the same time; thereafter, you are qualified to listen to and practice the first half of the completion stage.

If you attain realization at the ceremony, that is the mark

of a perfect empowerment; if you do not feel anything special at the ceremony but have completed the visualization in accord with the standard, you have at least sowed the seed for gaining enlightenment quickly.

### *Wisdom-knowledge Initiation*

The wisdom-knowledge initiation is usually conferred with the image of a dakini. In the yab-yum image, the male yidam symbolizes the clear light aspect of tathāgatagarbha, the female yidam, or dakini, symbolizes the emptiness aspect of tathāgatagarbha. During the initiation, touch the image of the dakini with your finger and visualize, by way of this connection, you have swiftly attained the wisdom of realizing emptiness. The wisdom-knowledge initiation can be received this way.

The second half of the completion stage, called completion stage without marks, is the most complete practice. Through the third level empowerment, conducted with the thangka of the dakini, and the practice of emptiness, we can actualize the union of bliss and emptiness of the completion stage without marks, eradicate the obscurations of the mind, and implant the seed of the dharmakaya.

### *Precious Word Initiation*

The precious word initiation, the highest level of empowerment, is usually conferred with natural crystal. Crystal in its natural state is basically transparent; it has no obscurations and symbolizes the tathāgatagarbha within. When light shines on it, the crystal displays brilliant rainbow-like colors; however, when there is no light outside, the rainbow colors do not manifest even though the crystal has this hidden capability. Similarly, when we still have afflictions and abide in ignorance, there is no way of experiencing the buddha wisdom or the



luminous mind; when we have eliminated our afflictions and realized emptiness, the luminous mind manifests. This is clearly elucidated in the texts related to the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, such as the *Samdhanirmocana Sutra*, the *Lankavatara Sutra*, as well as *In Praise of Dharmadhatu* by Nagarjuna, and *Uttaratantra Shastra* by Maitreya.

If we understand what tathāgatagarbha is and have some level of realization, we can abide in the state of realization when the empowerment is conferred, even though there is nothing really to receive since the mind already encompasses all wisdom. In the absence of realization, placing the crystal in our hand and on our head merely symbolizes a connection with the practice. During the empowerment, visualize we have through the power of the initiation eradicated the obscuration of body, speech, and mind at the subtlest level, and implanted the seed of the svabhavikakaya. The precious word initiation can certainly be received this way.

Some of the empowerments are followed by auxiliary initiations which utilize the five Buddha-families, five Buddha-crowns, bell, vajra, etc.; these make up the more extensive empowerments but not the most important. The most important are the four empowerments.

Having this knowledge, everyone can then understand what level of empowerment he or she is receiving at the initiation. During the course of the initiation, it is essential to listen carefully to the teachings and follow the corresponding visualization. This is very important; otherwise, the empowerment cannot be received.

### ***Final Steps in the Empowerment***

At the end of the empowerment, there are three other steps: one, offer the mandala; two, vow to uphold the tantric precepts;

three, follow the teachings and practice with diligence.

1. We perform the mandala offering to bring joy to the vajra master. The highest form of mandala offering one can make to the master is to put his teachings into practice; this is also called offering of Dharma. We should not think, in the absence of practice, the mandala offering can be completed just by offering the master money or material goods. If the teachings are received but not practiced, the buddhas and bodhisattvas cannot be pleased, however expensive the goods may be. If the master conferring the empowerment takes great interest in the material goods we offer, but not in how well the disciple is undertaking the practice, he is clearly not a person who fits the role of a vajra master.

This requirement is the same in sutra and tantra. For example, in taking the bodhisattva precepts, flowers and incense are also offered to accumulate the blessings that are necessary to receive the vows. Similarly, because an empowerment is a sacred event, the mandala offering is performed beforehand to generate great blessings needed to receive empowerment; after the empowerment, it is necessary to repay the kindness of the master. The best way to do so is to practice seriously, then propagate the dharma and help beings.

2. Concurrently, a person who has received all four empowerments must uphold the fourteen root precepts and some branch precepts; if the root vows are broken, the transgression is very serious.

Thus, immediately after the empowerment, a person must study and follow the tantric precepts. If the tantric precepts are broken to varying degree for whatever reason, the person can also repent.

It is said in tantra: when the four opponent powers are in place, the way to repent is to recite the Hundred Syllable Mantra 100,000 times, or the Vajrasattva mantra *Om Benzā Satva Hum*

400,000 times; negative karma can be purified completely this way.

For tantric practitioners, the expectations are high, the risks are also great; the result may be vajra hell if things go wrong. But if a person abides strictly by the rules and practices diligently, he or she can also attain buddhahood in this lifetime. Relatively speaking, the expectations in sutra are not as high, but the path to buddhahood is very slow.

At the same time, tantra also has its advantages. As an example, there are many precepts in Hinayana Buddhism; special exemptions are never made; once broken, it is always a transgression. In Mahayana Buddhism, the situation is much more open. Mahayana maintains that as long as the action benefits others and is selfless, allowances can be made for killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and drinking in specific instances. In the case of Vajrayana Buddhism, our first empowerment must be conferred by a vajra master. Thereafter, if the precepts are broken, we can immediately undertake the Vajrasattva practice of reciting the deity mantra 400,000 times and repent. After the repentance, we can visualize receiving the empowerment ourselves according to the Guru Yoga practice presented in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. If the visualization is clear, the result is exactly the same as receiving the empowerment directly from the vajra master. Through this method, the tantric precepts can be restored. Whereas in Hinayana Buddhism, the precepts can never be reinstated; in the sutra system, a person can take the bodhisattva vows himself only if a qualified Mahayana master cannot be found to confer the precepts.

Thus, we should not be afraid to receive empowerment for fear of descending into vajra hell; excessive worry and apprehension will only become obstacles to the practice.

In tantra, it is clearly stated: if the tantric precepts can

be maintained, a person can attain buddhahood within seven lifetimes. How can we not take up the precepts just because they are very exacting, like not eating for fear of choking or not seeing a doctor so as to conceal an illness?

3. After the empowerment, the disciple must make this pledge in front of the master: I will from now on listen to and follow the teachings of the vajra master.

This also means hereon we should follow the master's instructions to cultivate renunciation and bodhicitta, practice the generation stage and completion stage, study and practice earnestly, and uphold the tantric precepts.

With the dedication in the end, the entire empowerment process comes to a close.

The above is a simple introduction to the four levels of empowerment in tantra. After understanding these principles, whether or not we received our previous empowerments in compliance with the rules, we must ensure that any empowerment we obtain in the future accords with the standard.

## REQUIREMENTS AFTER THE EMPOWERMENT

After entering tantra, we need to understand and practice the generation stage and completion stage. The writings on this area of tantra are substantial. Among them is the Nyingma text *Guhyagarbha Tantra* which we must study; like *The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* in Madhyamaka and *Commentary on Valid Cognition* in Logic, it is the principal tantra in the Nyingma school. There are many commentaries on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, among them *Essence of Clear Light* by Mipham Rinpoche, which Khenpo Sodargye has already translated. All students of tantra should study and understand the entire tantric process from beginning to end, as well as the view, conduct, precepts, etc. in

tantra. Thereafter, the person can listen to and contemplate the teachings, then undertake the actual practices.

Tibetan Buddhism has very detailed and complete practices directed at people of different capacities; although many have not yet been translated, they can still be transmitted orally. In the tradition of masters in the past, Dzogchen practitioners were not permitted to read the texts before the practice. If the emphasis is only on reading the liturgy, not on the actual practice, the practitioner has merely acquired conceptual knowledge and familiarity with the terminology in Dzogchen; this could actually make it more difficult for him or her to experience the real thing during practice. Hence, Dzogchen is like Ch'an; neither espouses the use of words. Although the state of Dzogchen cannot be described with words, the masters nonetheless also recognized the possibility of different views emerging in the future which would be troublesome if there were no standard or reference to go by; thus, in the end they left behind many texts on Dzogchen. Among those translated into Chinese are *Great Perfection of Manjusri—Enlightened Wisdom in Hand* by H.H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, *Seminal Quintessence of the Lama* (from *Seminal Quintessence in Four Parts*) by Longchenpa, and the like. In terms of the pith instructions on Dzogchen practice, *Seminal Quintessence of the Lama* comes first on the list.

The deity practice of the generation stage can be of great benefit to us by removing obstacles on the path and accelerating the process toward our final attainment.

The completion stage practice is divided into two kinds: one, completion stage without marks; two, completion stage with marks.

In the completion stage with marks, the practitioner works with the winds, channels, and essences of the body; the practice is relatively complex but produces results very quickly. At the same time, because it is complex, we must have a qualified

teacher to guide us, or things can easily go wrong; people in general need not undertake the practice for this reason. In Tibetan Buddhism, the practice of working with the winds, channels, and essences of the subtle body is quite common, especially in the Jonang school that places great importance on the Kalacakra practice.

In the completion stage without marks, neither the practice of working with the winds and channels of the subtle body nor the generation stage practice is necessary; the most sacred practice at this stage is Dzogchen, followed by Mahamudra. One can practice Dzogchen right after completing the outer and inner preliminaries. This is a safe and swift path which requires the student to have faith in the master and in Dzogchen; without adequate faith, nothing can be attained.

There are strict requirements to be followed at Dzogchen teachings, that is, no more than seven people can attend at a time. However, nowadays the teachings are open to the public; so-called "Dzogchen practitioners" are everywhere in town. Nevertheless, H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche used to say if the audience is not qualified, even seven would be too many; if the audience is qualified, one to two hundred people would not be a problem.

Sutra and tantra are different only in method and technique; the final result is the same. In the end, all methods are superfluous. Like washing our hands and taking a bath, the soap and bath gel have to be washed off; whatever method is used in sutra or tantra must ultimately be relinquished.

Tantra is very rich in methods. There are practices for the living and practices in bardo for the dead; there are practices during the waking state, after falling asleep, even during the dream state; we can all find a path that suits us. With a firm foundation, we can attain realization quickly through the tantric practices. Thus, tantra is also called the vehicle of skillful means.

If we remain indefinitely in the outer and inner preliminaries stage, we are shutting out other practices and impeding our progress on the path. That would be our own biggest problem.

With no prior experience in initiations nor bias against tantra, a person can first read up on the tantric system of thought; this accords more with the standard of receiving an empowerment after some knowledge is acquired. Many people nowadays do not understand tantra and have preconceptions about the practices, which is quite normal. Even the great masters Hung Yi and Xu Yun had their doubts at one time; upon deeper understanding, they acknowledged tantra is not only true Dharma but also a swift path to realization. Not knowing the symbolism behind some of the ritual implements and images of tantric deities, it is easy to draw the wrong conclusion. Different views and methods take time to assimilate or break in. When Buddhism was first introduced into China, it faced similar problems; through mutual understanding and integration, the different traditions eventually reached common ground.

In the early days when tantra arrived in Tibet, some masters would hide the thangkas of the yidam to keep them out of view; the implements like vajra, bell, and drum were also locked in a chest. This was done for two reasons: one, to prevent misconceptions; the other, to keep the practices secret. An important factor in the success of those masters was that they kept their practice to themselves.

Another point to keep in mind: even if taking meat and alcohol no longer affects one's practice, as in the case of some siddhas in the past, we should still protect the virtuous roots of sentient beings and set the right example, especially in front of a crowd; to engage in wrong conduct that causes others to develop the wrong view and descend into the lower realms is irresponsible.

In *The Parable of a Black Snake*, it is said although all attachment must be relinquished in the end, there is also a process of letting go. Tantra uses relatively powerful methods to subjugate our discriminating mind that distinguishes purity from impurity. The difference between sutra and tantra is likened to the difference between traditional therapy and surgery. Although conservative treatments are also a cure for sickness, they take a long time. Surgery is very effective, but only a person in good physical condition can undergo surgery. Similarly, when our minds are closed and not ready to accept anything different, it would be better to set aside the advanced tantric practices for now, first study the sutras or common preliminaries in tantra, generate bodhicitta, and practice the Middle Way; this is a long but safe path to liberation. Taking the safer path would ensure nothing goes wrong. When our mental faculties mature and our ability to adapt to uncommon situations reaches a certain level, only then can we accept the Vajrayana methods which, like fighting fire with fire, are very powerful in subduing the mind.

## The Fourteen Root Tantric Vows

**Persons who intend to receive or have already received an empowerment must study the fourteen root tantric vows; persons who have never received and do not plan to take an empowerment should not read the following text!**

There are many different classifications for the various systems of thought and practice in Vajrayana Buddhism. For example, in the Nyingma tradition, the inner tantras are divided into three categories—Mahayoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga. The other traditions also have their own classifications. But regardless of the Buddhist tradition and classification, the fourteen root vows are the common precepts acknowledged by all Vajrayana schools in Tibet. Regardless of the kind of tantric empowerment received, these vows must be upheld.

Of course, with the fourteen vows as a basis, the empowerments also have different precepts. Dzogchen has precepts that are specific to Dzogchen, the *Guhyaagarbha* Tantra has precepts that are specific to the *Guhyaagarbha* Tantra, Kalacakra has precepts that are specific to Kalacakra. Whatever the other precepts may be, the fourteen root vows are the common prerequisite. Previously, we explained the five stages of tantric practice in accordance with Rongzom Pandita's viewpoint; two of the stages pertain to precepts: one is receiving the empowerment to enter the mandala, the second is receiving the precepts. Here we restate the problems connected with

receiving precepts and upholding them.

Presently, empowerments prevail in many places, whether at home or abroad. Wherever the initiations are held, they attract a lot of followers. But regrettably, the precepts are usually not emphasized during the empowerment; moreover, the people receiving the empowerment never give thought to what is expected of them after the empowerment. Although there is inconceivable significance in an empowerment, great harm can be caused if we receive the empowerment in haste and without care, and do not strictly comply with the precepts afterwards. Empowerments can thus be both beneficial and harmful. For this reason, it is important that the precepts in Vajrayana Buddhism are explained.

As a start, prior to taking any kind of empowerment, we should become familiar with the precepts that correspond with the empowerment and examine if they can be complied with; if the precepts are difficult for us to follow, we should not consider taking the empowerment. For instance, the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* has five root vows and ten branch vows; if these vows are difficult for us to uphold, we should not receive this empowerment. Compared to tantric vows, the noncompliance of lay precepts is not as critical. When we are already circumspect in selecting which lay precepts to receive, we must be even more cautious with respect to tantric vows.

Currently, a serious problem exists at home; followers do not inquire into what is expected of them prior to the empowerment or after the empowerment. This may lead to far more harm than good. Without an understanding of the tantric vows, we can easily violate the tantric vows; if we do not repent upon violating the vows, the outcome may be quite alarming.

A comparison can be made between the pratimoksa (individual liberation) and bodhisattva vows, and tantric vows: although breaking the pratimoksa vows is a major wrongdoing,

it is trivial compared to breaking the bodhisattva vows; although breaking the bodhisattva vows is a major transgression, it is insignificant compared to breaking the tantric vows. The tantric vows are the most stringent of the three types of precepts and thus cannot be taken lightly; they must be studied and strictly upheld.

Be that as it may, the tantric vows are also incomparable in their superiority. For instance, from the standpoint of Hinayana Buddhism, the pratimoksa root vows cannot be reinstated if they are broken; however, from the standpoint of Mahayana Buddhism, with bodhicitta as a basis, they can be completely reinstated. If the bodhisattva vows are broken, one can receive them again from the guru; if the tantric vows are broken, one can not only receive them again from the guru but also renew the essence of the vows, through one's own visualization of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and their mandala, by repenting in front of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and receiving empowerment.

The two most critical problems involving precepts are: first, breaking the vows; second, not repenting. In the Hinayana sutras, the Buddha also said two kinds of people deserve to be praised: one is a person who does not violate the precepts at all; the other is a person who has the courage to repent his or her wrongdoing. This applies to all precepts. Although ultimately these two kinds of people can avoid descending into hell, there is a vast difference in how quickly they can gain accomplishment. The more precepts one violates, or the more serious the precept is, the further away one is from attaining buddhahood. Consequently, we must take into account the gravity of this matter and nip any violation in the bud.

If the tantric vows are upheld, the merit attained is immeasurable. It is possible for a tantric practitioner to actualize the buddhahood of Samantabhadra in just this lifetime; he need

not undergo the very long process described in sutra which takes three asamkhyeya kalpas. Likened to travelling by plane which is expensive, has strict security measures, and can be fatal if the plane malfunctions, it is nonetheless faster than all other forms of transportation. The tantric vows are the same way. If the precepts are broken and not purified through repentance, the downfall is rebirth in vajra hell which cannot be transcended. Therefore, if one blindly receives initiations without studying the tantric precepts, the consequences can be frightening.

Currently, many lay followers think that by attending the empowerment ceremony, they will receive an empowerment as a matter of course; this is not necessarily the case. If a person lacks knowledge of the precepts, it is better if empowerment is not received. If a person receives an empowerment without knowing the first thing about tantric vows, one can imagine the outcome. Thus, it is best to first acquire an understanding of the precepts, whether it is receiving the pratimoksa vows, bodhisattva vows, or tantric vows. The fourteen tantric root precepts are explained separately below.

### ***1. Deriding the Guru***

This violation is the most serious of the fourteen precepts. To start with, we should understand what a guru is. The concept of the guru is explained in different ways. In many of the discourses in tantra, there are six classifications: gurus who guide others to take refuge in the Three Jewels, gurus for the confession of one's sins, gurus who give the ripening empowerments with samayas, gurus who transmit the liberating instructions of the tantras, gurus who transmit the pith instructions, and general lineage gurus who teach the Dharma to students. The *Gubhyagarbha Tantra* also elaborates on these six types of gurus, but does not comment on whether

deriding the six types of guru leads to the same result. On this point, different views exist. Although the Nyingma tradition acknowledges one cannot slander these six types of guru, it does not clearly state whether or not disrespect for any one type constitutes a violation of the precept.

Some of the gurus maintain that the root vow may be broken if any one of these six types of gurus is derided. They base this rationale on the sixth root precept which prohibits criticism of one's own or other teachings. The term "one's own" refers to tantra, and "other" to sutra. If deriding the teachings in sutra is a violation of the precept, deriding the spiritual masters in sutra should also be a violation. Hence, these gurus believe this vow may be broken if any one of the six types of gurus is derided. Although this argument has its logic, it lacks sufficient theoretical basis.

Another viewpoint is representative of certain Indian siddhas and the great master Tsongkhapa. They assert that disparaging any one of the six types of guru is a major transgression, but not all cases are a violation of the root vow. The gurus referred to in this precept are the three most gracious gurus who confer the empowerment, who expound the tantric teachings, and who transmit the pith instructions.

To sum up, the different viewpoints have this in common—slandering the three most gracious gurus is definitely a violation of the precept. In many commentaries, these three most gracious gurus are cited separately; this at least shows the consequence of deriding these three types of guru is more severe than that of deriding the other gurus.

Regardless of the viewpoint, the *Vinaya* in sutra holds on to the most conservative criterion in addressing problems of such kind. Hence, on this question, we should also refer to the strictest requirement of not deriding any type of guru, including the spiritual master in sutra; it is the safest approach. If we have

disparaged a guru of any kind, we should repent in accordance with the rules on violating a root precept. This vow must not be taken lightly; it is best to be circumspect.

What action towards a guru constitutes a violation of the precept? The commentaries are very clear on this point; there is no dispute, as all viewpoints are the same. To deride a guru is to think one has on one's own already surpassed the guru—whether from the secular standpoint, one thinks the guru lacks character, knowledge, etc., or from the spiritual standpoint, one thinks the guru has broken the precepts, does not have wisdom, lacks meditative concentration, etc. The limit to violating the precept is thinking one has already received the teaching one ought to have, and no longer needs to pay respect to or maintain ties with the guru. The most serious is to harbor anger and hatred towards the guru, scorn the master, and disturb his mind. A violation is not confined to actions of body and speech; a person is deemed to have broken this vow just by generating these thoughts in the mind. The other precepts do not necessarily have this requirement.

There is another kind of situation: although the guru has merit and is accomplished in practice, he does not treat me fairly nor do as he is expected; when the guru directs me to do something, I am unwilling and become angry. This attitude is not a violation of the precept, but it is nonetheless a transgression. Under the circumstance, even if we have practiced diligently and have attained a certain level of realization, our progress will be interrupted. Hence, we should realize our error and earnestly repent. Harboring anger and hatred towards our vajra brothers and sisters is a grave matter, let alone towards the guru. On this question, we must all take every precaution to refrain from actions that we later regret.

Therefore, to avoid this serious fault, all tantric practitioners are reminded over and over again to conduct a thorough

examination of the guru prior to taking refuge with him. In the sutra system, this expectation is not as high but it is still best to be circumspect. Once a relationship is established between the guru and disciple, the guru should be respected and cherished. Whatever the circumstances, and however the guru manifests, we should only consider the guru's merit, not his inadequacy or wrongdoing. This is at present our most serious problem at home.

Nowadays, many people lack wisdom and rush to receive all kinds of initiation without truly understanding the background and character of the vajra master. After the empowerment, they quickly discover the problems the master has and proceed to disparage him. They are blind at a time when they ought to be investigating the master; they are fastidious and critical at a time when they should not be investigating the master. This is perverted conduct due to lack of knowledge and education. Hence, expounding and clarifying the tantric vows is a matter of great urgency; it cannot be delayed.

Regardless of the precept, a person who breaks the vow must be in a normal state of mind. If one's mental state is not normal, actions of body and speech which violate the precepts are not considered a violation, since the mind is empty of the thoughts that guide these actions.

## ***2. Transgressing the Words of the Buddha***

1. This must be a violation of the three types of vows—pratimoksa, bodhisattva, and tantric; it does not apply to rules contained in other scriptures;
2. This must be a violation committed with knowledge that one's conduct is a transgression;
3. This must be a violation undertaken with careless disdain for the Buddha's words concerning the precepts. For example, we know that stealing is wrong but we think there is nothing special



about stealing, so a transgression is not worth fussing about; or we know that drinking alcohol is prohibited in Hinayana Buddhism but we think drinking alcohol is not an obstruction on the path to liberation, so it is a reasonable thing to do. This kind of disdain for the words of the Buddha constitutes a violation of this precept. If we do not take the teachings lightly, for instance, we know drinking alcohol is wrong but we think—I simply cannot resist the temptation and am truly repentant, taking alcohol with this mindset (although a violation of the pratimoksa vow) is not a violation of this precept. However, if we have no regard for the teachings, for instance, we know that taking food after noon is a violation of the pratimoksa vows (albeit the least serious) but we continue to be reckless and think there is nothing to fear, this transgression is a violation of this precept.

### ***3. Accusing One's Vajra Brothers and Sisters out of Anger***

The Nyingma tradition maintains that all Vajrayana practitioners are vajra brothers and sisters; they are the object of breaking the vow. A root downfall committed against a fellow practitioner who takes empowerment from the same master is even more severe in consequence. However, fellow practitioners must uphold the tantric vows; if the other party has already broken the vows, he or she is not considered a vajra brother or sister.

What constitutes a violation? If there is anger but no physical or verbal abuse, it is not a violation of the root vow. However, if anger is accompanied by any form of abuse in body and speech, it is considered a violation. A verbal abuse must be received or heard by the other party; he must also know that it is directed against him. If the other party is hearing impaired and does not hear the accusation, it is not a violation of the root vow. The pratimoksa vows also have this qualification; for

instance, if a practitioner tells a lie, the other party must also hear the lie; otherwise, it is not a violation of the root vow.

If an action is not taken in anger but only to help the other party, like a mother hitting her child, it is not considered a violation.

Therefore, the boundaries of a violation are: 1. the object is a vajra brother or sister; 2. the other party upholds the tantric precepts; 3. one clearly knows the other party is a vajra brother or sister who upholds the tantric precepts; 4. anger is accompanied by physical and verbal abuse; 5. an accusation must be heard and understood by the other party. If any one of these factors is absent, the transgression is not considered a violation of the root vow, only a fault.

### ***4. Abandoning Loving-Kindness for Sentient Beings***

This violation is directed against individual beings, not all living beings. That is to say, if one abandons loving-kindness even for one living being, it qualifies as a violation. We know that giving up on all beings is very difficult. However cruel or evil, a person will always have compassion for someone, like his or her own parents and children. Hence, the reference here is to any individual being. This vow is relatively easy to break. An ordinary person who cannot manage his or her emotions will, in a fit of anger, lose his or her senses and break this precept.

What constitutes abandoning loving-kindness? If we vow to ignore a person, even if one day we are able to save and help that person; or we hope that a certain person does not find happiness and always encounter suffering. This mindset constitutes abandoning loving-kindness. Ordinarily, when we argue and fight, even in anger, we do not necessarily make such a pledge; only a very cruel person harbors this kind of thought.

The boundaries of this violation are: 1. the other party is

any sentient being; 2. the pledge alone is sufficient, it need not be accompanied by any action.

The Hinayana sutras maintain when the thought of desire arises in our mind, it is a transgression far greater than one hundred angry thoughts. Because this view asserts that actions like killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct that are prohibited in the pratimoksa vows are primarily the result of desire, not anger. However, from the Mahayana perspective, when anger arises in our mind, it leads to a transgression far greater than that produced by one hundred thoughts of desire. This is because the foundation of Mahayana Buddhism is bodhicitta, which is in direct conflict with anger. Hence, in Mahayana Buddhism, anger is a transgression that is truly terrifying.

In abandoning compassion for sentient beings, we are concurrently breaking the bodhisattva root vow. Mahayana practitioners who have, for instance, listened to the teaching of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* or the practice of bodhicitta and the four immeasurables will in general not break this vow if they have some level of realization. If this vow is broken, the outcome is unthinkable. We must make every effort to eliminate this kind of thought.

### **5. Relinquishing Bodhicitta**

It is not possible to relinquish ultimate bodhicitta, so the bodhicitta we are referring to here is relative bodhicitta. Specifically, between bodhicitta in aspiration and bodhicitta in action, it is the former. The reason being that even if we abandon bodhicitta in action, for instance, the practice of generosity, ethical conduct, and patience, it is not a violation of this precept as long as we still aspire to attain buddhahood to deliver sentient beings. However, if we abandon the aspiration to attain buddhahood for all sentient beings, our entire practice

and effort will be wiped out along with the aspiration, in the same way a piece of paper when burned leaves no traces of the words on it. If we are lazy or incur insult, that is, we have the aspiration at first but come upon harm inflicted by others, we may think: it is too difficult to deliver sentient beings, I am better off just protecting myself and seeking liberation for myself. This kind of thought constitutes a violation of this precept.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the sutras contain many cases in which actions like stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying are not prohibited. Exceptions are made if the intention is to help others, not to benefit oneself in any way. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, examples of this kind are often cited. Violations of precepts governing our actions are not terrifying; what is most terrifying is selfishness. If our mind is obsessed only with ourselves, the root of the Mahayana teachings is basically severed. Selfishness causes us to relinquish aspiration bodhicitta; the more selfish we are, the more likely we are to abandon the aspiration.

But self-attachment is not terrifying if we can transform attachment an ordinary person has to the self into a pledge to help others—I want to deliver sentient beings, I want to benefit sentient beings; regardless of my ability, I want to carry out this pledge now. If the true intent of practicing the preliminaries and releasing animals from captivity is not to benefit sentient beings, but only to serve one's own interests and attain favorable retributions in this life and after, this pledge in Mahayana Buddhism is as terrifying as taking drugs. Whenever this thought arises, all modes of learning—listening, contemplating, and meditation—that are connected with the thought become contaminated. Developing aspiration bodhicitta is not an easy thing. It would be truly regrettable if under the circumstance the aspiration bodhicitta that we worked so hard at developing

vanished completely.

In relinquishing bodhicitta, we are concurrently breaking the bodhisattva vow. It is extremely foolish to violate two types of precepts in just one thought. We should know that abandoning aspiration bodhicitta is likened to losing all the information on a magnetic disk after it is formatted; all the merit accumulated through years of listening, contemplating, and practice will come to naught. Therefore, when the first sign of relinquishing bodhicitta appears, we must be relentless in cutting it off to ensure a terrible mistake is not made.

### ***6. Deriding the Teachings of Sutra and Tantra***

This is about deriding one's own system of thought or that of others. Differences exist in what is perceived as the object of this precept: in one view, one's own refers to Buddhism, and others to the non-Buddhist, which is to say deriding the non-Buddhist schools is also a violation of this precept; in another view, one's own refers to tantra, and others to sutra, so the non-Buddhist schools are excluded. Of these two views, the second is correct.

Thus, this precept is directed at all Dharma in Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism, from Sravakayana to Dzogchen. It does not apply to the non-Buddhist schools.

Regarding the non-Buddhist schools, the sutras also mention sentient beings are vastly different in mental capacity and inclinations, and seek liberation in a wide variety of ways. We cannot control what others believe, nor force everyone to study Buddhism and tantra. Therefore, we must not arbitrarily slander other systems of thought if transforming or delivering other beings is not an imperative. Although deriding the non-Buddhist schools is not a violation of the root vow, it is very harmful. For instance, when we practice tantra and deride

others at the same time, we substantially prolong the process of achieving liberation; what could have taken a very short period of time, like a year or two, would take much longer to attain realization—ten, twenty years, even past this lifetime.

What constitutes slander? For example, if a person raises thoughts of anger towards a certain Buddhist school or say, with no basis at all, that the tenets of this school or a scripture that it follows did not originate from the Buddha. Naturally, from the standpoint of getting to the truth, you may state your position if it can be clearly substantiated. But if a person arbitrarily asserts, for instance, that the Buddha did not expound the tantras, it is a major transgression even if he has not received empowerment and entered tantric practice, and cannot break the tantric vows. If he has received the tantric precepts, the vows are without question already broken.

In slandering other Buddhist schools, is it necessary for the other side to hear what was said? Some people maintain the other side may need to hear it, but on this point we have not seen anything definitive. Thus, whether or not the other side must hear it, we should all be careful not to deride other Buddhist schools. The Dharma must not be slandered; the consequence is otherwise unbearable to contemplate.

Does this precept also apply to the treatises? The true meaning of the definitive treatises like *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* and *The Way of the Bodhisattva* are not different from the Buddha's words even though they are classified as treatises; if we deride these treatises at random and say their view is nonsense, it is a violation of this precept. If we are just joking or if we lack confidence in all the scriptures, it is not a violation of this precept as long as no slandering is acted out. The teachings in Sutrayana, Tantrayana, Pure Land, and Ch'an all originate from the Buddha and must not be slandered.

In deriding the teachings of sutra and tantra, we are also

committing the serious karma of slandering the Dharma at the same time; that is, in breaking both vows, we are concurrently leaving the karmic imprints of these two transgressions in our mind continuum. It is essential that we take every precaution not to slander the Dharma. This is the sixth root vow.

### ***7. Disclosing Confidential Teachings***

This violation pertains to disclosing the uncommon viewpoints, practices, and activities in tantra to people who do not understand the Vajrayana system of thought. This is not to say tantra has deficiencies and mistakes it wants to hide from others. Sentient beings are endowed with different mental faculties; transmitting the supreme, uncommon teachings to certain people who are not fully mature to receive them may lead instead to resentment on their part.

“A tree that stands taller than the forest is the first to be destroyed by strong winds.” History has borne witness to this. Several profound systems of thought and practice were misunderstood by people when they were first introduced. For instance, when Mahayana Buddhism was established, it was opposed by Sravakayana bhikshus who maintained that the Mahayana teachings offered something new and different simply to attract attention, and did not originate from the Buddha; when Ch’an Buddhism was initially introduced in China, it was confronted on all sides by traditionalists who accused it of being deliberately mystifying; similarly, when Vajrayana Buddhism first emerged, it was also met with opposition from individual practitioners of Sutrayana. In Tibet, the situation was also the same: when Prasangika Madhyamaka, Kalacakra, and Dzogchen were first propagated, all of them encountered major obstacles of varying levels of difficulty.

“An insect that dwells in the summer cannot talk about

ice.” This is to say, people who were ill-informed or wanted to stick to old ways had difficulty accepting these newly developed systems of thought that were original, out of the ordinary, and too profound to be understood. However, with the passage of time, they slowly developed an understanding of the teachings and began to identify with them. Many of the schools that once faced endless criticism were accepted by the public after they overcame various obstacles, but all had to undergo a process. Therefore, when others disapprove, it does not mean a particular system of thought is flawed; rather it is often because the view is sacred. We should not arbitrarily disclose the profound tantric view and practices to those who do not apprehend the real meaning behind these practices or whose faculties are not suitable. This is to prevent these people from slandering the Dharma. The consequences of revealing such secrets at random are serious.

Disclosing confidential teachings with no regard for the rules is a violation of this precept. Who are the people we should not reveal the teachings to? They should not be disclosed to: 1. a person who has never received an empowerment; 2. a person who may develop the wrong view if he or she cannot accept the profound teachings that are revealed to him or her; 3. a person who has only taken the vase initiation and can receive just the corresponding generation stage teachings but not the completion stage or Dzogchen teachings; 4. a person who has broken the tantric vows but is not willing to repent. Naturally, this precept does not apply to someone who is willing to engage in genuine repentance after breaking the tantric vows.

In addition, this precept is broken if the six following conditions are all met: 1. the person receiving the secret teachings must be one of the four kinds mentioned above; 2. the receiver must have generated the wrong view; 3. we know full well the other party will generate the wrong view—it is not

a violation of this precept if we did not expect the other party to develop the incorrect view but it happened; 4. the other party must understand the teachings that are revealed to him or her; 5. the disclosure is not really necessary—for instance, an exception can be made when most people in the audience can uphold the precepts and practice according to the Dharma; we may consider giving tantric teachings to benefit the majority of people even though some individuals among them do not have the right capacity; 6. the teachings that are disclosed must be the uncommon tantric viewpoints and practices. The preliminaries that are practiced before undertaking Dzogchen, like precious human birth, impermanence, and so forth, do not belong in this category; if the other party develops the wrong view towards the preliminaries, it is not a violation of this precept.

We cannot read other people's minds or know their thoughts as clearly as if one were seeing fire; we can only count on the other party's expression to determine if the person has already generated the wrong view. Although this precept is not easy to violate, it may be broken if we expound the profound views at random to people with no foundation in tantra at all. Everyone should still take this seriously.

### ***8. Mistreating One's Body***

In Vajrayana Buddhism, our body is the mandala of the five Buddha-families; it is entirely pure. If someone maintains the body is impure, impermanent, not the mandala of the five Buddha-families, it constitutes a violation of the five aggregates. As far as the Vinaya is concerned, burning one's finger as light offering to the Buddha, fasting, abstinence from food after noon, and so forth are all considered a violation of this precept. However, this is not to suggest we cannot observe the eight precepts or make light offering with our fingers. Tantra gives

praise to asceticism if it is undertaken as a Dharma practice. Tantra also contains meditation practices on the impurity of the body and impermanence.

Although these appear to be contradictory, the fundamental problem is in the view we hold. If we think—the essence of the five aggregates is the mandala of the five Buddhas but the body, in the minds of ordinary people, is a composite of many tainted elements, like blood, flesh, bone, skin, and fester; it is only an illusion, but the sense organs, that is, eye, ear, nose, and tongue perceive it as impermanent and impure; meditation on the impurity of the body and ascetic practices are also skillful means espoused by the Buddha—this view does not violate the tantric precept.

However, if we think—from the standpoint of ultimate truth our body cannot be the mandala of the buddhas, that the Buddha taught pure perception only to people of certain mental capacities—this view is certainly not definitive. Thinking this way contradicts the underlying view in tantra; to mistreat the body based on this reasoning violates this precept. The scriptures are not entirely clear on what constitutes the limits of a violation, some only mention ascetic practice and suicide. However, is taking one's own life a clear violation of this precept? Not necessarily. If a person commits suicide based on the view that the body is not the mandala of the buddhas, the tantric vow is broken. If a person cannot think through his or her problems and commits suicide, it counts as half the transgression of killing a person (taking the life of others bears the full karmic consequence); however, this fault is not connected in any way with breaking the root tantric vow, so it is not a violation of this precept. This is the eighth root vow.

### ***9. Raising Doubt about the View***

This vow is similar to the eighth root vow. The object of this root downfall encompasses all external phenomena and oneself. In Vajrayana, external phenomena and one's being are inherently pure; they are the mandala of the buddhas, the so-called five aggregates are also the five Buddha-families. If we think—from the standpoint of ultimate truth all phenomena cannot be the mandala of the buddhas, that the Buddha taught the intrinsic purity of phenomena out of expediency only to certain people to transform them, that in fact is not so. Even raising doubt about the tantric view is a violation of this precept.

In Logic, skepticism is divided into two kinds. For instance, a person can respond to the statement “all things arising from causes and conditions are impermanent” in two ways. One, are conditioned phenomena impermanent? Maybe. Two, are conditioned phenomena impermanent? Maybe not. If our opinion towards the tantric view is “maybe not”, this precept is broken. Many people do not have any understanding of the Vajrayana viewpoints before entering tantra, so there is no violation of the precepts to speak of. However, they are breaking this vow if they begin to raise doubt after an understanding of the tantric view is acquired. The right approach is: I do not comprehend the tantric concepts now, but they are the teachings of the Buddha and should therefore be correct; when I have a chance to hear and study the tantric scriptures in the future, I will gradually acquire the right understanding. This way the tantric vow is not in danger of being broken. When we overly rely on or believe in our sense perceptions, we take our perceptions to be the reality of all phenomena, arbitrarily interpret the Buddha's words, and reject the tantric view, and in so doing violate this precept. This is the ninth root vow.

### ***10. Keeping Bad Company***

The object of violation in this precept pertains to people who engage in unvirtuous or evil deeds; this includes “people who slander the Three Jewels and spiritual masters in general, who break their vows and lose faith in the tantric teachings, who cause damage to the Dharma and harm other sentient beings, and those beings in the three lower realms, etc.” If one has the ability and the right condition to deliver these ten kinds of beings, but does not make the effort, it is a violation of this precept. Ordinary people like us do not have the ability to transform others and are not required to do so; hence this precept is not directed at us.

However, there are circumstances under which we may still violate this precept. Although we do not have the ability to deliver others, we must keep a distance, that is, not associate in body or speech with people who slander their guru, denigrate the Dharma, and harm other beings. Naturally, we should still engender bodhicitta. In the mind of bodhisattvas, these people who have created all kinds of negative karma are not enemies but our past parents to whom we are indebted. Thus, we must not relinquish compassion for them in our mind. If unable to deliver them we moreover appear to be their best friends and outwardly treat them with loving-kindness (in body and speech), we are violating this precept.

Emphasis should be placed on one point: if contact is maintained with these kinds of people to correct them, the purpose being to protect the Dharma and the interests of sentient beings, it is not a transgression.

This precept consists of two levels: one is directed at accomplished practitioners who possess the ability to deliver malevolent people—it is a violation of the precept if they refrain from helping them; the other is directed at tantric

practitioners in general—it is a violation of the precept if practitioners give the appearance of maintaining a very close and harmonious relationship with the ten kinds of people mentioned above, and show compassion for them on the surface. This is the tenth root vow.

### ***11. Failing to Reflect on Emptiness***

The object of violation in this precept is emptiness. In the ninth vow, the object is intrinsic purity and clear light, which is explained from the standpoint of phenomena. Here, emptiness which is free of all conceptual elaborations is closer to the view expounded in the Prajnaparamita sutras or established by the Prasangika-Madhyamaka school. If we use logical reasoning to infer the vast expanse of emptiness is beyond conceptual elaboration, inconceivable, and inexpressible, yet conclude in the end—that emptiness is not beyond conceptual elaboration but is instead the Hinayana view of no-self or the view of non-existence initially propounded by the Svatantrika-Madhyamaka school—we are violating this precept. This is not to say we must be well versed in or realize emptiness that is free of conceptual contrivance, only that no vow is broken if we do not have this understanding or experience. This is the eleventh root vow.

### ***12. Deterring Those with Faith***

This precept pertains to upsetting those who have faith in the teachings. The object of violation encompasses people who have faith in the Three Jewels and in tantra particularly.

If we say or do things to humiliate people with the purpose of instilling doubt which causes them to feel annoyed, lose faith, and abandon the tantric path, it is a violation of this precept.

These four conditions must be met to qualify as a violation: 1. the other party is a person with faith; 2. measures

are taken with the purpose of deterring people's faith; if we unintentionally cause others to dislike the Mahayana teachings, it is not a violation; 3. the intention to deter alone is not a violation, it must be followed by actions in body and speech; 4. the other party loses faith as a result.

Students of Buddhism will not in general break this vow. Nevertheless, due to disputes among the various schools of thought, one should still be mindful that taking sides could lead to a violation of this precept. This is the twelfth root vow.

### ***13. Failing to Observe the Samaya Commitments***

There are two kinds of samaya objects: one, samaya substances; two, samaya implements such as a bell, vajra, kapala (skullcup), etc. If we think the samaya substances are dirty, or the ritual implements are unnecessary, that we only need to practice and can do so without the samaya objects, it is a violation of this precept when we refuse the samaya objects with this view in mind.

Meat and alcohol must not be taken wantonly when our practice has not reached a certain level. At ceremonies where alcohol is offered, it is only necessary to dip one's finger in the alcohol and apply it to the lip; where meat is offered, it is only necessary to take a bit no larger than the leg of a fly. This hardly qualifies as eating meat and drinking alcohol from a mundane perspective, but it signifies an acceptance of the samaya substance. Even in tantra, the teachings strongly oppose the enjoyment of samaya substances at will. As for ritual implements like the bell, vajra, and kapala, a tantric practitioner can place these on the offering table. Even if they are missing, as long as we do not reject them, we are not breaking this vow.

The nectar pill which is unique to tantra is made up of different medicinal drugs, among them samaya substances

as well as the nectar of Guru Padmasambhava and other vidyadharas. If a person receives the nectar pill, for instance in a tsok practice, it means he or she is accepting the samaya substance, so a vow is not broken.

Not all practitioners observe the samaya commitments the same way. Two kinds of people need not formally accept the samaya objects: the first is a novice who is not expected to comply since the person is still unable to accept the samaya objects; the second is a highly accomplished practitioner who perceives meat, nectar, sugar, fruit, etc. as one and the same and does not discriminate among them. All other practitioners should observe the samaya commitments.

Our mind has a natural tendency to discriminate between things and see phenomena as either pure or impure. The purpose of accepting the samaya objects is to overturn this discriminating thought; in recognizing all things as equal through this mode of acceptance, we can progress in our practice and eventually attain a state of great equanimity. As a novice, we are not able to comprehend the original face or true nature of phenomena. However, if we stay attached to our own sense perceptions and maintain the samaya substances are impure not only in appearance but also in essence, we have already contradicted the view in tantra and therefore violated this precept. This is the thirteenth root vow.

#### ***14. Denigrating Women***

The object of violation in this precept is all women. Because in this degenerate time, many dakinis assume different identities to save sentient beings. More of them appear as women than men. On any occasion, the dakinis can manifest and appear. If we arbitrarily denigrate women as a whole, we could unknowingly slander the manifestations of Vajravarahi, White Tara,

Kurukullā, and other buddhas.

The following four conditions must be met to qualify as a violation of the fourteenth root vow: 1. the other party must be all women; although the insult is directed at one woman, it has to be established with all women in mind; 2. the remark is intended; 3. the substance of the slander is a fault common to all women; 4. the other party must hear the insult.

These fourteen root vows are the most basic precepts in Vajrayana Buddhism. A tantric practitioner must abide by these precepts at all times and take great precaution in protecting and maintaining them. If a vow is broken, we must pull back before it is too late and immediately repent. Although many methods of purification exist, the most common and most sacred is the Vajrasattva practice. Through this practice and with the four powers, we can repent and amend our mistaken ways. However serious the transgression may be, it can be purified through repentance. This is where Vajrayana Buddhism is unsurpassed.

To practice tantra, we must accept some rules, but what we get in return is immeasurable.



## The Samaya Vows of the Guhyagarbha Tantra

**Only those who have received the inner tantra empowerment should read this text.**

### INTRODUCTION

The fourteen root tantric vows and the eight branch vows are the common vows for all the highest tantras, or the inner tantras. All Vajrayana practitioners must observe these vows; therefore, we need to know precisely what each vow entails.

Here, we will discuss the vows pertaining to the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. Many people know that the Nyingma practice is categorized into three different yogas, namely, Mahayoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga, of which Mahayoga is the most basic. Just as *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* is the root treatise of the six major treatises of Madhyamaka, the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* is the root tantra of the eighteen tantras of Mahayoga. That is to say, the contents of Mahayoga are all included in the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. Therefore, the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* is also one of the tantras of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

There are fifteen vows pertaining to the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, including five root vows and ten branch vows. It is considered keeping the samaya pure if one can strictly observe these fifteen vows. Although there are the uncommon vows of Anuyoga and Atiyoga in addition to the fifteen vows, the main portion of the

vows are already covered by the fourteen root downfalls and the five root vows discussed here. Our introduction to all the tantric commitments is essentially complete with the basic fourteen root vows, and the vows of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. If we don't violate any of these vows, we can pride ourselves on being worthy Vajrayana practitioners.

The scope of the tantric vows is rather broad, including even the pratimoksha and bodhisattva vows. To subsume, there are three levels of tantric vows—common, uncommon, and special.

The common vows are the pratimoksha and bodhisattva vows; the uncommon vows are the fourteen root downfalls, the five root vows, and the like; the special vows are the ones that must be observed strictly when undertaking particular practices. Our discussion here falls in the category of the uncommon vows.

The choice of the different levels of vows to be taken varies from person to person. We should choose based on our own actual situation. Given the right condition, if one chooses to take the pratimoksha vows for the monastic, do that; if not suitable, one can still take the less stringent vows for a lay practitioner. Having established this base, one can proceed to take the bodhisattva vows. As for the level of the bodhisattva vows to be taken, one can also choose. Practitioners of superior capacity can choose the higher, more demanding level of twenty bodhisattva vows; practitioners of medium capacity can choose the level of four bodhisattva vows or eight vows as each vow can also split into two; those of inferior capacity who are unable to practice bodhicitta in action can just promise to uphold bodhicitta in aspiration. It is only appropriate to receive the tantric vows on the basis of having taken the bodhisattva vows.

Pratimoksha and bodhisattva vows are common to both sutra and tantra, and the former is common to Mahayana and

Theravada. Vajrayana practitioners ought to take these vows as well, but in the uncommon tantric vows, such as the fourteen root downfalls and the five root vows, there is no mention of refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and cheating, because pratimoksha and bodhisattva vows do not belong to the category of either the uncommon or the special vows.

There are two ways to take vows. One is to take vows in sequence—first the pratimoksha vows, then the bodhisattva vows, and finally the tantric vows; the sadhanas for taking these three vows are also different. The other is at the time of receiving Vajrayana empowerment. Because the tantric vows already encompass the essence of the pratimoksha and bodhisattva vows, one can receive the essence of the other two vows concurrently when empowerment is conferred. Nevertheless, the most prudent and appropriate way is to take the vows in the order above.

If one has received Vajrayana empowerment and also kept the samaya pure, one will attain liberation within sixteen lifetimes even without ever having practiced the generation or completion stages. If on the basis of keeping pure samaya, one also undertakes practice in strict accordance with the lama's instructions, one will advance very quickly on the path and be able to attain liberation in this lifetime, in the bardo, or in the next life. On the other hand, if one breaks the samaya and refuses to repent, one will not only miss out on any chance for liberation but also end up in vajra hell wherein suffering is far more unbearable than any hellish suffering described in the sutra system.

However, the tantric vows have an advantage. That is, if after properly receiving empowerment for the first time, one either intentionally or unintentionally breaks the vows but wishes to repent and mend this mistake, one can recover the essence of the vows, even if the vajra master is not present, by

visualizing the yidam and the vajra master transmitting the vows again.

Now there are some practitioners who completely overlook the precepts and the practices of renunciation and bodhicitta, preferring to focus instead on the practices of yidam deity, the generation stage, tsa lung, Dzogchen and so on. In reality, if the foundation is not solid, we are far, far away from any chance of attaining results from these practices, begetting no real benefit for us even if we practice day and night.

If we want to take the path to liberation or learn and practice true Vajrayana, we must start by cultivating renunciation and bodhicitta; the way to do that is through the outer and inner preliminary practices. Some lay practitioners ask, “My lama gave me permission not to practice the preliminaries, so I don’t need to, right?” I think this is like giving one permission not to gain liberation! Having established a firm foundation, we can go ahead to receive empowerment; afterwards the most important thing is to strictly observe the vows. If the samaya vows are broken in the course of practice, one must immediately repent and renew the vows again.

Usually we can also proceed to the practices of the generation and completion stage after empowerment. But we in this modern age face too many attractions, spend too much time and effort on gathering wealth and fame, troubled by constant discursive thoughts and serious afflictions. It becomes extremely difficult to rely on the complex practices of the generation and completion stage to eradicate samsara from its root when the general condition of the world now is not conducive to leading a contemplative life. Therefore, for people like us living in this degenerate age, we need a practice that’s well-directed, easy to apply, and powerful enough to be able to dismantle self-grasping with ease. This practice is Dzogchen.

Of course, not everyone is of the right capacity for

Dzogchen; if not, this practice may not be helpful. The criterion for determining the level of one’s capacity is faith. If one has strong aspiration for Dzogchen, wishing earnestly to practice Dzogchen, and ultimately attain the fruit of Dzogchen, one is deemed to have the necessary capacity for the Dzogchen practice.

Nonetheless, whether it is to practice Dzogchen or other tantras, rigorous observance of the tantric vows is top priority. Failing this, all chances of attaining accomplishment will be gone. In order to further your understanding of the importance of tantric commitments, I will discuss the tantric vows from another angle which can serve as a reminder these vows are to be upheld.

The way to receive Vajrayana vows is through empowerment. However, presently there are some problems with regard to empowerment in many places including Tibet; the situation is much worse in China. Although this subject has been touched upon many times before, it is still necessary to repeat it here in order to raise more attention.

Nowadays in many places, there is no shortage of vajra masters conferring empowerment, and opportunities to receive empowerment are aplenty; people in general have a keen interest in this. However, many of them tend to overlook the tantric commitments that are closely related to the empowerment. People know they have received empowerment, but they know nothing about the samaya vows that must be observed subsequently. What remains is only the formality of practicing Vajrayana, with very few people actually benefiting from the tantric practice.

The first problem happens at the time of empowerment. Because the recipients don’t really know how to obtain true empowerment, whether or not the person giving empowerment is qualified or they themselves are qualified to receive it, they

just blindly go along with the ritual. No result or progress can be attained in Vajrayana practice under this circumstance. The second problem is after receiving the empowerment, the recipients pay no attention to the tantric vows and don't even realize it when the vows are broken. People like to make excuses for themselves by saying "those who know nothing have no fault," but there is no mercy in front of karma.

The cause of these problems is that Vajrayana is not taught systematically in the Chinese regions and the method of propagation is not appropriate. Presently, in the Han Chinese area, Vajrayana is equated with activities like empowerment, blessing, acquiring treasure vase, conducting fire offering, tsok offering, etc., but whether these represent true Vajrayana is difficult to say. Many highly respected masters and followers of sutra maintain a negative view of tantra, partly because they have not grasped the real meaning of the tantric teachings and also because the method used to spread Vajrayana in the Han area is not quite right.

These problems occur not because Vajrayana itself is flawed but because Vajrayana practitioners do not follow the proper steps. To stop the resulting damage, we need to re-educate those who have gotten empowerment but are ignorant of what empowerment entails, offering them different ways to make up for what they have missed. This is the first goal of teaching the samaya vows.

The second goal is to strengthen the dissemination of this knowledge, to educate people on its critical importance so that those who intend to take up Vajrayana practice will take precaution against breaking the vows, which can only be helpful to their own practice.

Clearly, the propagation of knowledge about Vajrayana practice is absolutely necessary. So far we have discussed the significance of explaining the tantric vows. The specifics of the

samaya vows of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* will be introduced next.

## THE MAIN CONTENTS OF THE SAMAYA OF THE GUHYAGARBHA TANTRA

The samaya of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* consists of fifteen vows—five root vows and ten branch vows.

### *The Five Root Vows*

#### *1. Venerate the Vajra Master*

This is the same as the first vow of the fourteen root downfalls. It has been emphasized in many Nyingma tantras that all tantric attainments, both great and small, depend entirely on the blessing of the vajra master. Whether one can obtain any siddhi from the master is a matter of one's own faith. Absent the faith, we cannot obtain any blessing and siddhi even if the master is a real buddha or Vajradhara.

Over the many years of learning Vajrayana, we have truly come to realize that, without the master's blessing and pith instructions, all the skillful knowledge gleaned from the precious sutras and tantras may not necessarily be of any real value.

For example, after becoming a disciple of H.H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, I stayed at Larung Gar for the next twenty years studying scriptures including the Five Great Treatises and many others. Although I can pass as a somewhat knowledgeable person, what I know is just intellectual understanding from the books; for actual, specific questions, I must still rely on the master for ways to respond. Besides the vajra master's blessing and pith instructions, what we learn from the books is often not useful when we are at a critical juncture, nor is it capable of taking us to liberation. This I have experienced deeply numerous times!

In the days that we spent with the master, we could feel the warm attention from the master at all times, like the sun shining on us. When we encountered difficulties or setbacks, the master's blessing was even more ubiquitous. And it was precisely with this blessing that innumerable people were able to overcome obstacles that strike like ferocious storms on the spiritual path, to solve a myriad of intractable issues, and to pass insuperable difficulties.

Whether it is personal practice or spreading the Dharma to benefit sentient beings, no significant success can be achieved without the master's blessing and pith instructions. We can only realize the most profound meaning of the Dharma when we combine theoretical learning with the master's blessing. Therefore, not only Mipham Rinpoche and other great masters in the past repeatedly pointed out the importance of the vajra master to us, but we have also come to realize this truth in the course of our actual practice. Hence, all tantric practices place particular emphasis on having faith in the vajra master.

This is how Vajrayana should be learned and practiced—we must find a supremely qualified vajra master first, then generate strong faith to match it. Only when the two are combined can we taste the profound meaning of Vajrayana. When learning Vajrayana without such faith, it ends up being just a formality. Therefore, being able to maintain rock-solid faith in the master is critical to the practice of Vajrayana.

Here, the master refers to the six types of vajra masters as mentioned in the Nyingma tantras: 1. The one who guides us into the door of Buddhism, such as transmitting the vows of refuge, the vows of the lay practitioner, pratimoksha vows, etc.; 2. The one who teaches the tantras; 3. The one who gives pith instructions, who not just explains the common tantric texts but the essence of tantric practice as well, such as the proper steps of undertaking practice; 4. The one who practitioners go to

express repentance after breaking the samaya; 5. The one who confers empowerment; 6. The regular lineage master—besides the aforementioned five masters, the one who benefits us with some teaching of the Dharma, that is, who has taught us more than four lines from the sutric scriptures.

On the question of whether a root vow would be violated if one were to abandon any one of these six types of masters, the opinion from those who are more influential and respected in Vajrayana vary somewhat. On this, more has been said in the discussion on the fourteen root downfalls.

However, the three types of masters, those who confer empowerment, explicate the tantras, and transmit the pith instructions for tantric practice, are absolutely the object of committing downfall; if one disrespects or abandons these three masters, one will surely break the samaya. Regarding this, our respectable predecessors all happen to agree. As for the other three types, so far I have not seen any two lamas holding exactly the same view.

I have also discussed the proper attitude toward the other three types of masters before. The view of one master is this: the seventh of the fourteen tantric root downfalls—deriding our own and others' tenets—draws the line between sutra and tantra. Our own tenets refer to tantra; others' tenets refer to sutra. If the sutric teachings cannot be casually slandered, the masters of the sutra tradition must also not be slighted but receive the respect they rightly deserve. It is reasonable to suggest the vow is broken if we don't respect these masters. This opinion does make sense, hence we should take the most conservative approach to treating all masters.

This is also what we have done over the years. For example, in the case of tantric teachings, except for the masters who were invited by my lama to either confer empowerment or transmit important lineage teachings to us, I have never

received empowerment from any other. The few masters that I have were all appointed by my lama. Now that I have enough empowerments and lineage transmissions, I do not plan to receive any more in the future. Many of these masters have already passed away, only a few still remain; hence this should not be too big a problem for me.

With regard to sutra, in the early days in our institute, many fellow Dharma friends obtained lineage teachings from one another. For this reason, we still treat these Dharma friends with the same respect as we do vajra masters. Although we have not stayed around to serve them at all times, mentally we remain very cautious, constantly reminding ourselves not to show disrespect or bring harm to them. If you can do this, you are safe. Never do anything recklessly just because they are teachers of sutra lest the samaya vow may be inadvertently destroyed. Among all the samaya vows, violation of this particular vow is the most serious. So do pay attention to this.

What counts as disrespect? As defined previously in the discussion about the binding factors of a transgression, it is not necessary to actually do or say anything to have this vow broken. Just the thought—I have already gotten the teaching and the transmission that I want, so I no longer need to beseech the master to teach me anymore, or to serve and respect him—is enough to be deemed abandoning the vajra master. It is an even more serious offence if this thought is also accompanied by action. Because the requirement for observing this vow is so stringent, tantra always stresses the necessity of examining the vajra master prior to establishing a master-disciple relationship.

Unfortunately, it happens so often now in many places that people rush to receive empowerment without due examination beforehand and start to deride the master recklessly, broadcasting his or her faults, almost immediately after the empowerment. This is terrible! However, it is very likely that the

recipients never actually received this so-called empowerment. The reason being the person bestowing the empowerment is not qualified, or the recipients are not eligible to receive the empowerment. Under the circumstance, it is best if the attendees do not receive anything at all; if however they received the empowerment but denounce the master out of ignorance, they are committing a root downfall.

Details about how to follow the master are explained clearly in *Finding Comfort and Ease in the Nature of Mind* by Longchenpa and in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Every Vajrayana adherent must know thoroughly the required qualifications of a genuine vajra master and the proper way to be a disciple so as not to behave in any way that one will regret later on.

In the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, venerating the vajra master is the second vow, but because this vow is the most important and the outcome of breaking this vow the most serious, I have chosen to move it to the first place to give it adequate attention.

## 2. Do Not Reject the Supreme View

The “supreme view” means the tantric view or the state of realization attained in tantra. Because this state is the ultimate reality of all phenomena, and the highest possible in Buddhism—be it the Great or Lesser Vehicle, the inner or outer tantras—it is deemed supreme.

To an unrealized person, this must seem like a very vague concept. Simply put, it has two levels of meaning: first, it is emptiness as explicated in the Madhyamaka texts *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* and *Introduction to the Middle Way*, and the view of emptiness put forth in much simpler and common language when we discussed the idea of “no self of person, no self of phenomena”; second, it is the essence of the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, tathāgatagarbha or the

luminous nature of mind, a view most prominently featured in the *Nirvana Sutra*.

Although the two are discussed separately, they are in fact one and the same. The union of emptiness, the theme of the second turning, and luminosity, the essential point of the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, is the realized state of Vajrayana. All these concepts are available in the sutric texts, but only obscurely presented, while the explanations given in the tantric texts are very clear. Nonetheless, tantric realization does not go beyond what is presented in sutra; all are within the confines of the second and the third turning of the wheel of Dharma. This is the “supreme view” from the standpoint of ultimate truth.

From the point of view of relative truth, the “supreme view” of Vajrayana is that “all phenomena are the mandala of the buddhas.” On this level, there is greater discrepancy between sutra and tantra. Theravada deems all phenomena are unsatisfactory, impermanent, without self-existence, and empty; Yogācāra holds all phenomena are only mind’s construct; Madhyamaka posits all phenomena arise interdependently and are of empty nature. The “irregular” view of tantra is difficult for the other schools to accept.

At this point, we cannot observe directly with our naked eye all phenomena are the mandala of the buddhas. Everything we see before our eyes are formed by the fierce afflictions of sentient beings and the impure outer environment, but in buddhahood all these appearances are as pure as that of the Western Pure Land; through the practices of the generation stage and tōgal, we can actually see or sense they are the pure mandala. But as it stands now, such state to us is still something in the distant future. Even so, we should know the nature of all phenomena is thus. This is how tantra defines the “supreme view” from the perspective of relative truth.

Here, the distinction between relative and ultimate truth is made from the tantric point of view, unlike the definition given in the context of Madhyamaka. The “supreme view” in our discussion here represents the highest realized state of relative and ultimate truth in tantra. If this is rejected, one is deemed to have broken the vow.

What constitutes rejection of the supreme view? Actually, the supreme view and our mind are inseparable, so we can’t really discard it. It is a very serious downfall if we think that the Vajrayana view, which claims the nature of all phenomena is luminosity and the mandala of the buddhas, is merely an expedient way used to help certain sentient beings give up their attachment or afflictions, that it is not the ultimate but the provisional meaning of the Buddha’s words; or that the nature of phenomena cannot possibly be the mandala of the buddhas or pristine luminosity, since only what we see with our eyes is absolutely real and correct.

Ordinary people have tremendous arrogance. Many are used to being self-centered, relying solely on their five sense organs to make decisions. What they themselves cannot feel must not be correct. However, the conclusions derived from the analysis and judgment of the sense organs only have a say over matters in our everyday life; for things at the deeper level, they become untenable. Therefore, we must leave our pride behind and observe this vow as best we can.

How should we uphold this vow? From now on, whether or not we have attained realization or are able to appreciate the transcendental state of Secret Mantra, we should constantly remind ourselves that despite our inability to realize or comprehend the significance of these states, they are the teachings of the Buddha himself, which have been proven true by numerous accomplished masters and respected practitioners through their personal experience; this must have significance in

itself. What we fail to understand today, due to our ill-prepared capacity, we will one day be able to realize. At the least, this is the kind of attitude we should have in order not to break the vow. Hence, not having attained realization of emptiness does not imply the vow is broken. Whether the vow is broken or not depends on the attitude we hold toward the divine state gained from the tantric path.

The substance of this vow is also contained in the fourteen root downfalls, just not listed separately.

### 3. *Continual Practice of Mantra Recitation and Mudra*

“Mantra” can have multiple meanings, but usually it means the heart mantra of the yidam deity that we normally recite; “mudra” also can mean many things, but usually it’s about the gesture performed with our hands.

The meaning of “continual” has three levels. The upper level is to practice mantra recitation and mudra at all times day in and day out; the medium level is to perform recitation and mudra on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, and 30<sup>th</sup> of each month based on the lunar calendar; the lowest level is not to go without practice for more than three months. If nothing is done for more than three months, the vow is deemed broken. Even though this is stipulated in the texts, the real criterion for breaking the vow is the intention not to practice mantra recitation and mudra ever again. Absent this intention, it is not considered a root downfall if one skips the practice for lack of time or forgets to practice because of other preoccupations. However, according to the texts, it is a downfall if the oversight lasts longer than a quarter of a year or two months. So, in any case, we cannot go against this vow. It is perhaps somewhat difficult to maintain the practice every day, but to require the practice not be interrupted more than a period of three months

is not too much to ask.

Some people may have this worry, that is, they have received many different empowerments and each empowerment requires recitation of its particular deity mantra, which can be difficult to do. Under the circumstance, we can take all the mantras together as a whole and choose only one mantra in place of all to recite. This way, as long as we continue to practice the heart mantra and mudra of one deity, it can be construed as continuously performing the mantra recitations and mudra of all the deities. It is a root downfall if no mantra recitation is performed whatsoever.

Nevertheless, this vow is normally not so easy to break.

### 4. *Treat Those on the Right Path with Kindness and Respect*

The main point of this vow is to ask vajra brothers and sisters to be kind and friendly with each other. The consequence of violating this vow is not as serious as that of rejecting one’s vajra master, but this vow is very easy to break, hence it is equally important and worthy of our attention.

Here, the “right path” means tantra. All followers of tantra, regardless of their affiliations with the different schools like Nyingma or Gelug, are vajra brothers and sisters. Although the scriptures say the luminous mind of the tathagata pervades all sentient beings and hence all are Dharma brothers and sisters, the criterion for breaking this vow is whether one has received empowerment or not.

If violation of this vow takes place among disciples who have either received empowerment from the same master or received empowerment in the same mandala, the resulting retribution is even more severe.

Here, we can use an example to explain the notion of “receiving empowerment from the same master.” Suppose



one follower receives Guhyagarbha empowerment from H.H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, and another follower receives Kalacakra empowerment also from H.H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok. Even if the two receive empowerment in different mandalas, but from the same master, they are like siblings having the same biological father.

We can also use another example to illustrate the so-called “receiving empowerment in the same mandala.” Suppose one follower receives Kalacakra empowerment from H.H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, and another follower receives the same empowerment from a different master. Even if the two receive empowerment from different masters, but in the same mandala, they are like siblings having the same biological mother. So, these vajra followers should take care even more to maintain unity and treat one another with respect.

This vow is directed not just at vajra brothers and sisters who have such a close relationship. In fact, all Vajrayana followers are deemed the object of this vow. As it is very easy to break this vow, we all must be mindful.

Nowadays, the situation with vajra followers in the Chinese regions is quite worrisome. In some cities, the Vajrayana communities are segregated into many sub-groups, with some based on sects such as Gelug or Nyingma, some on different lineages within the same sect such as Palyul or Dzogchen of Nyingmapa, and others by the different masters they follow. The groups fight among themselves, each boasting of having superior teachings and the best master.

When certain respected masters go to these places to transmit Buddhadharma or organize activity such as life release, they have to deal with some uncomfortable situations. If the teacher is a house guest of a member of one group, the other group would be displeased; if the teaching location is arranged by one group, the other group would refuse to attend; if the

teacher participates in life release organized by one group, the other group would immediately back out, and so on. Some people often like to say things that are not conducive to cultivating the spirit of unity, causing discord or even a rift among vajra brothers and sisters. Such behavior is at once silly and childish, which is something all Vajrayana followers must put an end to in both thought and action. We sincerely hope that Buddhadharma or Tibetan Buddhism can have a healthy development everywhere, guiding people to think correctly, resolving the negative emotions, pressure, anxiety, and ignorance of people so as to lead them to a life of happiness and awareness. It is never our intention to cause unnecessary argument or trouble for others.

What action constitutes a downfall? First of all, there must be aversion or antipathy. If the bickering with or the mean words said to our vajra friends are actually for their sake, like parents scolding their children, it is not a downfall. If, however, physical or verbal abuse is executed out of plain aversion with selfishness as its base, and the abusive words are heard by the other party, it is a downfall. Aversion alone without the accompanying actions cannot cause a root downfall. These criteria are also described in the chapter “The Fourteen Root Tantric Vows” in this book.

Please note that it is quite easy to break this vow. If bickering with fellow vajra brothers or sisters takes place out of aversion, a downfall is committed. We all know that unpleasant exchanges with people around is a common scene, but we must prevent this from happening with fellow tantric practitioners. We may be excused if we don’t know the requirement of this vow, but once known, as we do now, it is inexcusable if we fail to observe the vow. Therefore, be sure to be mindful at all times, lest we should regret later on.

### 5. *Keep Secrets from Those Who are Uninitiated*

The purpose of this vow is not to reveal secrets to those who are uninitiated in the Vajrayana training.

There are ten types of secrets. The first four are eternal secrets, that is, they must always be kept as secrets. The next four are temporary secrets, that is, they are secrets only for a limited time; once past a certain limit, they need not be kept secret anymore.

The ninth is that which should be kept secret after careful consideration is given. For example, upon discovering the faults of a vajra master or vajra brother, one decides not to say anything after thoughtful evaluation, as it would cause others to have unnecessary misunderstanding and develop the wrong view as a result. This kind of secret should not be revealed.

The tenth is the entrusted secrets, that is, things that others entrust us with, such as the names of their yidam deities. In this case, “others” represent the vajra master and fellow vajra adherents. Anything that they advise us not to go public with, we must remember to keep to ourselves.

To whom should we not reveal these ten secrets? We should not tell those who have not yet received empowerment or those who are biased against Vajrayana. If others develop a mistaken view of Vajrayana as a result of being told these secrets by us, we have broken the vow. If we disclose the secret that all phenomena are intrinsically the pure mandala of the buddhas, but the other party does not raise doubt or lose faith in Buddhadharma, nor develop the wrong view, it is not considered a root downfall.

The first of the four eternal secrets is the above-mentioned view of Vajrayana.

Normally, Mahayana practitioners would not have a mistaken view regarding the nature of all phenomena being

emptiness and clear light from the perspective of ultimate truth, because the teachings related to this subject are quite substantial in the sutras.

With regard to relative truth, the tantric view maintains that all phenomena are primordially pure. The inherent nature of all sentient beings, at this very moment, is already the buddha, including one who is in the midst of doing evil deeds; but if one cannot realize this in the present moment, one can only be an ordinary person burdened with afflictions. Many practitioners of sutra find this hard to apprehend. Although they are used to the saying “a butcher becomes a buddha the moment he lays down his cleaver,” they would be flabbergasted if a villain raising a chopper were deemed a buddha; they would then retort, “Thus, wouldn’t beings in the hell realm also be buddhas?” In their minds, such a view is really very ridiculous. Therefore, the tantric view from the perspective of relative truth should not be carelessly revealed to the public at will except to those vajra brothers and sisters who have received empowerment and are undertaking the tantric practice.

The second eternal secret is the tantric acts. It is quite possible tantric practice may call for extraordinary and baffling behavior from its practitioners. In order to prevent others from developing the wrong view, the details of these acts are not even to be told to those who have received empowerment but have yet fully understood the significance thereof. It can only be revealed to them in measured steps when they gradually gain understanding and adjust themselves to the idea.

The third eternal secret is the name and image of the yidam.

The fourth eternal secret is the auspicious signs marking certain progress in the practice.

These latter two secrets should not be revealed to anybody, not even vajra brothers and sisters. If one thinks one’s own vajra

master is not good at keeping secret, one can withhold these secrets from the vajra master as well, for fear that he might tell others while teaching or during conversations. It is not because the master cannot hear these secrets but that he might tell others about them. If others know these secrets, one cannot make progress in one's practice. Of course, if the master has a scrupulous disposition and is able to keep a secret well, then it is all right to tell the master. But one should never tell vajra brothers and sisters the name and image of one's yidam deity, nor various phenomena appearing in the course of practice.

Many lay practitioners in the Chinese regions are very interested in this topic, often holding heated discussions about this. Their discussions range from seeing magnificent images of buddhas and bodhisattvas, magical lights or a beautiful heavenly being, and so on. They talk with extravagant gestures and make outrageous claims.

I'd like to remind everyone that if what you see is an illusion, it is merely a phenomenon that can neither benefit nor hurt you. In this case, do not hold any attachment to it, or flaunt this in front of others; just let it run its course. If it is a real sign of progress in your practice, make sure it is not revealed to anyone but your master, as a revelation of this kind can cause hindrance and damage to your practice. If you lie about seeing the deities, you are likely to commit the downfall of making false speech; if it is true, you should not tell anybody at all. Although such a revelation does not inflict any harm on Vajrayana, it would become an obstacle to your own practice.

One should be practical and down-to-earth when learning Buddhadharma. Don't brag about the so-called unusual phenomena that you think you encountered, such as seeing some kind of light, rainbow or feeling certain energy flow, and so on. It will not do you any good to talk about it, only bring harm to yourself.

There is no time limit on the aforementioned four secrets; they remain secrets forever.

As for the four temporary secrets, we can illustrate with the following example. If one prepares to do a month-long mountain retreat with three or four friends for yidam practice, the location, time, members practicing in the same mandala, offerings, and dharma vessels to be used in the practice are all information that should be kept secret, and not disclosed to anyone before the completion of the retreat. After the month-long retreat ends, so ends the need to keep it secret.

Regarding this rule, Rongzom Pandita held the view that when Vajrayana is accepted by people in general and is taught rather publicly, it is really not a problem to divulge these secrets. But in earlier times when Vajrayana was not as widely spread and people were mostly wary of its teachings, it was necessary to keep such things secret.

In any case, it is best to keep things secret in the course of doing practice; otherwise, untimely disclosure may bring both human and non-human disruptions and obstacles. Hence, do not reveal the four temporary secrets before any scheduled practice is completed.

The ninth secret is that which one thinks ought to be kept secret because its contents may cause misunderstanding that brings harm to Buddhadharma, vajra masters, and fellow vajra practitioners, or cause sentient beings to incur loss.

The tenth is the entrusted secrets which are secrets entrusted by the vajra masters or vajra brothers and sisters.

None of these ten secrets can be disclosed to people who have not received empowerment, who have broken samaya but refuse to repent, who used to practice Vajrayana but have since stopped, who have no faith in Vajrayana, and who refute the ideas of karma and samsara. If one tells these secrets recklessly, causing the other party to develop the wrong view,

one will commit the root downfall; even if no mistaken view is engendered, one will still commit the branch downfall. This vow is the same as the seventh of the fourteen tantric root downfalls.

These secrets do not signify any problems within Vajrayana; the aim is to allow people to slowly ease into the tantra tradition and to spread tantric teachings on the basis of not causing harm to sentient beings in any way. The concern here is the fact that Vajrayana does offer something unique which is not available in the sutra tradition, and is not easily accepted by people who have only learned from sutra. It is akin to the situation where people found it hard to accept Ch'an Buddhism when it was first introduced into China, and certain scientific theories when they first emerged.

The above concludes the five root samayas of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. It is stated in the root verse of the tantra that these five samaya vows include all the vows of Vajrayana and the pratimoksha. As far as Vajrayana is concerned, anyone who can strictly observe these five root vows is deemed having pure samaya. But according to the higher samaya of Dzogchen, these five only encompass all the samayas up to the level of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*.

### ***The Ten Branch Vows***

The branch vows are divided into two groups with five vows in each group. The first group is to not forsake the five poisons; the second is to not forsake the five nectars.

#### ***1. Do Not Forsake the Five Poisons***

The five poisons are five kinds of afflictions, namely, greed, aversion, delusion, pride, and jealousy.

The meaning of “do not forsake” varies. The view of Theravada holds that the five poisons are real, so they must

be eliminated. The Bodhisattva Vehicle sees the five poisons not necessarily something that must be obliterated; if there is bodhicitta that can serve as the premise or the supporting condition, afflictions can then be transformed into the means for awakening. The view of Vajrayana is quite high, which maintains afflictions don't really exist; the so-called greed, aversion, delusion, pride, and jealousy are actually the wisdom of the buddha, once realization is attained. Thus, there is no need to forsake anything.

Naturally, from the point of view of ordinary people, the five poisons are absolutely not the wisdom of the buddha. But in the divine state of the deity after attaining realization, all are the wisdom of the buddha.

How can we actually apply this? Although we can elevate our state of realization through continual practice and eventually come to the realization that the inherent nature of all phenomena is the wisdom of the buddha, we will never be able to perceive or encounter this state if our practice fails to reach this level. As we have yet reached such a high level in our practice, we must first eliminate the afflictions. Take greed as an example. While the practice of white skeleton meditation is not in accord with the tantric view that all phenomena are the mandala of the buddhas, the practice can still be used as an antidote to counter greed by tantric practitioners before they attain this level of realization. It would be wrong to make irresponsible remarks by saying greed, aversion, and delusion should be left to stay because they are all the wisdom of the buddha, that to practice white skeleton meditation is just a silly move.

Therefore, please don't misunderstand. The intention here is not to say we don't need to obliterate afflictions right now; rather, it is just a rough description of what it would be like after attaining realization.

## 2. Do Not Forsake the Five Nectars

We all know what the five nectars are. The reason why we should accept them is because they are a skillful method unique to Vajrayana for swiftly eradicating our attachment. The sutric method for breaking attachment adopts a gradual approach. In order to achieve this goal more quickly, those who ascribe to the tantric view, have a foundation in the practices, and possess the right capacity are required to accept the five nectars so that they can personally experience the total equality of all phenomena, and perceive the truth that the notion of being pure or impure is nothing but attachment of the mind. This is also one of the acts unique to Vajrayana as mentioned above. However, Vajrayana strongly opposes forcing beginners on the tantric path to accept the five nectars.

How should we actually apply this particular vow? It is stated in the writings of Longchenpa and other masters that, before attaining a certain state in the practice, one can start by consuming the nectar pills made with nectar from realized masters in the past. Now, many nectar pills contain a small amount of such nectar in their ingredients. Consuming these nectar pills is deemed complying with the vow. If such nectar pills are not available, one can instead visualize the meals as five meats and five nectars at meal time every day or on auspicious days. This can also be seen as accepting the five meats and five nectars.

It is easier to keep the ten branch vows than the root vows. Although breaking the branch samaya is serious enough, it is nothing compared to violating the root samaya. If one commits a root downfall and refuses to repent, it will cause great damage to this and future life and to one's merit accrued from practice, even its total destruction. The consequence is severe and frightening, hence the designation of the vows as

the root samayas. Whereas breaking the branch samayas will only cause damage to one's merit from practice to varying degree, depending on the seriousness of the violation, but not its fundamental destruction. That's why these are the branch samayas.

## CONCLUSION

This is a simple introduction to the root and branch samayas of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. As students of Vajrayana, it is all right if you don't have the chance to learn Dzogchen or the generation stage practice, but you must observe the samayas without ever breaking any. If you are forced to break the vows or do so on purpose, you must make sure to repent and restore the vows again. This is particularly important.

It is most dangerous when some people pay no attention to this, break the vows recklessly, and don't repent. This would not only destroy merit accrued from practice over many lives but also condemn them to vajra hell with no hope of escape for eons.

Many of us received empowerment from H.H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok. Whether or not we were able to visualize clearly during the empowerment, we can rest assured that we received complete empowerment simply due to the inconceivable power of blessing from the supreme master. There is no question about this at all. The rest is to observe the samaya. The good thing about tantric vows is that if one breaks the vow after receiving empowerment and a qualified master is nowhere to be found, one can still receive empowerment again from the master through visualization of the vajra master. In terms of how to receive empowerment, related information can be found at the end of the chapter on Guru Yoga in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. One can restore the samaya by following

the instructions therein.

However, there is no similar method to restore the pratimoksha vows. One of the advantages that tantric vows have over others is its supreme methods for repentance and restoration of samaya.

If we can keep samaya pure, we will definitely attain liberation in the not too distant future, even if it doesn't happen in this life. These are the words said by the Buddha himself. The Omniscient One never lies; of this we have substantial proof.

Water holds up the boat, it also sinks the boat. Tantric vows can help us attain the state of Vajradhara swiftly, but they can also send us to the most horrible vajra hell. It is totally up to us where we want to end up.

## The Binding Factors of Transgressing Tantric Vows and How to Repent

As mentioned already, the advantage of tantric vows is that the vows can be restored repeatedly after they are broken. And it is not necessary to have a master present to restore the vows; it can be done simply through visualization.

### THE BINDING FACTORS OF TRANSGRESSING TANTRIC VOWS

We will first discuss the binding factors of transgressing the root vows before explaining ways to restore them. This is because certain factors must be present to commit a root downfall of a pratimoksha, bodhisattva, or tantric vow; without these factors, the vow is not considered broken.

The binding factors of the fourteen tantric root downfalls have already been elucidated in the chapter on tantric vows. As for the five root samayas of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, the binding factors for the corresponding samayas of the fourteen root vows are the same; the discrepancies between the two have also been explained in our discussion on the five root samayas. Here, we will discuss further the common factors of transgressing both.

The scriptures list both four and seven binding factors, which will be explained separately.

## *Four Binding Factors*

### *1. Object*

The object for almost every downfall is different; for example, the object of rejecting the master is the master, the object of showing animosity toward a Dharma brother or sister is the Dharma brother or sister, and so on.

Who or what does not qualify as an object of a downfall? Take the example of harboring antipathy toward fellow Dharma followers. If two people are fighting out of strong aversion, and if both have received tantric vows and the vows are intact while they are fighting each other, the object of downfall is established; if one of them has never had empowerment, or has received empowerment but broken the samaya and not yet restored it before the fight, in this case the object of downfall is not established because he or she is just the same as any ordinary person who is not a tantric practitioner. Vajrayana followers who fight with this kind of person may violate certain branch vows that are quite serious, but not a root tantric vow.

Likewise, if the master one rejects is not one of the six types of gurus or a good spiritual friend, one will not commit a root downfall. The same rule can be applied to evaluating the objects of other downfalls.

### *2. Motivation*

First of all, the critical point about motivation here is whether one is mentally fit. It is said in both sutra and tantra that a person who is deemed to have broken any of the pratimoksha, bodhisattva, and tantric vows must be of sound mind. If a person is mentally incompetent, unable to distinguish between right and wrong, he or she cannot violate the vows by any means. As such a person has no control over his or her

mind, having no idea what a vow downfall means, the violation is not deliberate.

Secondly, the criterion is whether there is intention. In the case of a person who is not mentally unstable but commits a downfall due to mistaken perception or misunderstanding, this too is not a violation since it is not the person's intention to do so. All violations of vows must be done out of deliberate intention; if the violation is committed inadvertently, it is not deemed a downfall even if the person's mental condition is sound.

Hence we can see even if a mentally unstable person hits or verbally abuses his vajra brothers and sisters out of anger, and the accusations are heard by the parties involved, a vow is not broken because the person's mind is already disturbed.

### *3. Action*

Here "action" refers to those of body and speech, not the mind (most precepts stipulate actions of body and speech, but a few can also be broken with just a thought). The differences are presented in the discussions on the fourteen root downfalls and the five root samayas.

Take the example of abusing vajra brothers or sisters out of anger. If one harbors great anger toward fellow practitioners but does not take actions of body or speech against them, a root vow is not broken. Similarly, some of the fourteen root vows require physical or verbal action as a condition for committing a root downfall; without this condition, a transgression is wrong but it is not counted as a root downfall just yet.

But some downfalls are not premised on physical and verbal actions, such as the fourth of the fourteen root downfalls—abandoning loving-kindness for sentient beings, and the fifth—abandoning bodhicitta. In these cases, no action is called for, a

thought is enough to warrant a downfall. For instance, if you think “never again will I aspire to attain buddhahood for the sake of sentient beings”; or if upon seeing someone suffer, you either gloat over that person’s misfortune or swear silently to yourself “no matter how badly that person is suffering, even if I have the means to help, I will not offer my help,” you have already broken the root vow without saying a word or doing anything

However, downfalls such as criticizing the view or practices of other traditions, or denigrating women, must be premised on spoken words. That is, one must express these sentiments in words in order for them to be considered root downfalls.

#### *4. Result*

Take the example of stealing. If someone has stolen something but does not think the stolen objects belong to him or her completely, it is a transgression, but not a root downfall. The same rule applies to all other vows, that is, if the transgression is not taken to its conclusion or the process of committing the transgression is not complete, the transgression is not a root downfall.

The requirements for each of the fourteen root downfalls and the five root samayas are all different. When all the factors for breaking a vow are met, one loses the samaya.

#### ***Seven Binding Factors***

1. Whether a downfall can be established depends on how the transgression occurs, if it is acted out of strong desire or fierce aversion. In Mahayana, as long as actions such as stealing, killing, telling lies, and sexual misconduct are not driven by desire and anger, a vow is not broken. What the bodhisattvas want to abstain from the most is selfishness. If the transgression

is primarily motivated by selfishness, it will break the vow; if instead the motivation is for the sake of sentient beings, the transgression may not necessarily break the vow. To be more specific, if the actions are completely motivated by compassion for the benefit of others, with no selfish intent whatsoever, they not only do not break any vows, but are also deemed meritorious. Such cases are aplenty in the sutras. I am sure you can all name a few, so no further elaboration is necessary here.

2. Whether a downfall is established at the end depends on whether the person acted consciously, knowing clearly the object of his or her action. This factor is the same as that mentioned above, so it is not repeated.

3. If breaking a vow requires taking physical action as a premise, in the case of showing animosity toward vajra brothers or sisters, the moment the assault is carried out, the vow is broken; if the requirement asks for verbal action, then the criterion is the other party must hear the words spoken, and upon hearing those words, the vow is broken.

4. If the violation entails just mental action, it is subject to certain boundaries. Assuming the twenty-four hours of a day are divided into six intervals, each containing four hours, if in one interval or within four hours of the transgression, the person concerned regrets the wrongdoing and vows to amend his or her ways, the precept will not be broken completely; however, if after four hours, the person shows no signs of regret, regards the whole thing as a game, even take pride in the action, the samaya will be lost.

5. All downfalls must be committed by persons who are mentally sound and consciously intent on carrying out the transgression.

6. At the time of the transgression, if the perpetrator not only feels no regret but rejoices in his or her action, and all the other factors are also present, the vow will be broken for sure.



Please note that here when we talk about a sense of contrition, it does not mean feeling penitent after the fact but right at the moment when one is engaged in the wrong action. For example, the moment the sense of regret arises, one immediately gives up the action that results in a root downfall.

7. Every vow has its own specific time limit for repentance; beyond this limit, there is no way to reverse the fact that the vow has been broken. In that case, all one can do is to make the best effort to restore the vow, or end up having to regret it over countless future lives.

Unlike the four binding factors, it is not necessary for all these seven factors to be present to break a vow. For instance, the third factor that requires actions of body and speech and the fourth factor that pertains to actions of the mind cannot possibly be satisfied at the same time. While the demarcations in the four factors and seven factors are different, their meaning and significance are about the same. If all the conditions are met, the violation is very serious.

In sum, each vow of the three types of precepts has specific binding factors of its own; if the factors are not all present, the transgression may qualify as a fault but not a root downfall. If we can firmly grasp all the binding factors for each vow and measure the extent of the transgression accurately, we can more easily choose our actions so as not to make grave mistakes out of ignorance.

## WAYS TO REPENT AND PURIFY THE VOWS

There are four ways to purify and restore broken vows: to purify with realization of emptiness; to purify with the power of meditation; to purify with relative bodhicitta; to purify with noble deeds.

### *To Purify with Realization of Emptiness*

This is the most sublime purification. By way of practicing emptiness, one who has attained realization of emptiness can not only completely purify all negative karma resulting from violations of the three types of precepts but also obliterate the habitual tendencies and seed of such karma.

However, this method is beyond the capability of ordinary people like us. Of course, I am in no position to judge your state of realization. The Buddha prohibited followers from passing judgment on others without basis; for all I know, some of you may have already attained a high level of realization. In any case, I am referring to a situation in general; to a person in the early stages of practice, this method is not helpful even if it is very sacred.

### *To Purify with the Power of Meditation*

This is a simple and effective method that ordinary people like us may use to succeed. In Vajrayana, there are many practices for purification, but we don't need to seek those complicated practices; just the Vajrasattva practice, the most classic and sublime meditation practice for contrition, is enough. Visualize the main deity Vajrasattva and the hundred-syllable mantra from which the nectar drops and washes down one's body so that one's negative karma is completely purified. These are all done with visualization, which is also the best kind of meditation to purify obscurations.

The Venerable Atisa said that tantric vows are more stringent and relatively easy to break, but there are also very specific, uncommon, directly pertinent, and extremely effective methods to repent the transgressions of vows in Vajrayana.

There are broad, medium, and concise versions of the Vajrasattva practice: H.H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok taught a

concise practice and Mipham Rinpoche had an even shorter version of the practice; the more complex version is the one in the inner preliminaries. We can choose any of these based on our own situation.

All purification practices must contain the four opponent powers.

The first is the power of refuge, that is, the object that one relies on for support when undertaking the purification practice. For the Vajrasattva practice, the deity Vajrasattva is the power of refuge; when practicing bodhicitta, bodhicitta is the power of refuge; if practicing emptiness, emptiness is the power of refuge.

The second is the power of regret, that is, a strong sense of remorse over past wrongdoings. This is critically important. Without this sense of regret, negative karma can be diminished to a certain degree by reciting the hundred-syllable mantra, but it would be very difficult to have it purified completely.

The third is the power of resolution, which is vowing to change one's ways right away and not repeat previous misdeeds. Absent this resolution, and any change in one's speech or action, negative karma can only be lessened but not totally eliminated. This is also very crucial.

The fourth is the power of remedy, which is any antidote one can apply to purify negative karma, such as recitation of the heart mantra of Vajrasattva, prostration, life release, and so on.

It does not matter what kind of method one uses for purification; the method must include the four opponent powers. Although we are not capable of applying other kinds of meditation for purification, all Vajrasattva practices in broad, medium, and concise versions are easy to do; they are also the best meditation for purification. On the premise that the four opponent powers are applied, reciting the hundred-syllable mantra 100,000 times will ensure all negative karma we have

accumulated since beginningless time is purified. This is what the Buddha said in the Vajrayana tantras; it is the ultimate of the real meaning of his words, not stated only as an expedient to guide or to free certain sentient beings from suffering.

The Buddha also said in the tantras that just reciting the heart mantra of Vajrasattva *Om Benzā Satva Hum* 100,000 times can also purify all negative karma, including the transgressions of root samayas. During the time of the Buddha, people did not suffer as much from afflictions, so reciting this mantra 100,000 times was sufficient; now in this degenerate time of confusion and intense suffering, people must recite the mantra 400,000 times, that is, four times as much, in order to completely purify negative karma. As this is not too hard to do, H.H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok used to ask everyone to recite the heart mantra of Vajrasattva 400,000 times during the annual puja of Vajrasattva.

By inference, people in this period of declining Dharma should also recite the hundred-syllable mantra 400,000 times. But the hundred-syllable mantra is relatively long and takes more time to complete; to recite the mantra 400,000 times entails some difficulty, thus we are not asked to meet this more stringent requirement. Even so, as long as one can recite the hundred-syllable mantra sincerely 100,000 times, all negative karma, including wrong actions such as killing, stealing, telling lies, etc. committed before taking the vows and any transgression of tantric samaya after taking the vows, can surely be purified.

The seriousness of breaking the pratimoksa vows is like an itchy skin rash compared with breaking the bodhisattva vows; damage from transgressing the bodhisattva vows is only skin-deep versus that from losing the tantric samayas. A violation of the tantric vows is much more serious than a violation of the pratimoksa vows. But even breaking a samaya can be thoroughly

purified with this method, let alone a transgression of the pratimoksa and bodhisattva vows. This is not a casual remark by me but a statement the Buddha made personally in the tantras. We have substantial evidence from the texts to support this point.

So, there is no need to despair if we do break a vow. Instead, we should have confidence all negative karma can be purified completely through the Vajrasattva practice.

Although there are many ways to purify negative karma with the power of meditation, only a brief introduction to the importance and the sublime significance of the Vajrasattva practice is given here. For the specific practice itself, you should refer to the relevant sadhana texts.

### ***To Purify with Bodhicitta***

Bodhicitta is all-powerful. As long as bodhicitta is aroused, one can easily accomplish any aspiration, whether it is to gather merit, purify negative karma, or take the path to liberation; on the other hand, when there is no bodhicitta, one can do everything possible for accumulation and purification, and wreck one's brain to seek liberation, the effort will still be too weak to yield any result.

It is said in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, "Bodhicitta is like the inferno at the end of time that can destroy all serious negative karma in an instant." This means once there is relative bodhicitta, all negative karma can be purified completely at once.

So, one who has genuine bodhicitta but has violated the tantric vows should not despair but instead encourage oneself this way: even if I have broken the tantric vows, I must not give up my goal because I have pledged to free sentient beings from suffering. I will resolutely continue to fulfill my aspiration,

no matter what difficulties lie ahead or what karmic results I have to bear. With this, all negative karma including that of losing samaya can be naturally purified even without having to undertake any specific purification practice. Bodhicitta, the all-powerful weapon that can subdue any adversary, the wonder drug that can cure all afflictions and make life anew, should be applied whenever possible; it's not meant to be stored. Of course, it would be even better to practice purification on the basis of this aspiration.

As for the bodhicitta practice, it is elucidated in both *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind* by Longchenpa; the practice adopted by all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism is also presented rather clearly in the *Luminous Wisdom Series*. In summary, bodhicitta is the most effective antidote. We do not rule out purification practices such as the practice of Vajrasattva, but bodhicitta alone is powerful enough to replace all purification practices. This is absolutely true.

### ***To Purify with Noble Deeds***

Noble deeds are primarily actions taken courageously and wholeheartedly to deliver sentient beings from suffering without concern for one's own ability. Even as ordinary people, if we exert real effort to do what we can little by little, our own karma can be purified at the same time we strive to benefit other beings.

For example, to cultivate unconditional giving is a very good purification practice; any form of giving, whether it is giving of material things, of Dharma, or of protection to those in distress or danger, can purify the negative karma of breaking tantric vows. Although many Buddhists are not qualified to transmit the Dharma, reciting mantras or the names of the buddhas to

beings during life release is also a form of giving of Dharma. This act of generosity is very pure because it is selfless; we recite the mantras only to benefit these beings, not to gain anything in return. The Buddha said in the sutras the supreme and most sublime form of giving is giving of protection; the most precious and highest level of discipline is not harming any sentient beings. Therefore, performing life release to give protection to beings is truly a meaningful act.

Apart from this, there are four other noble deeds. That is, on the basis of not serving self-interest or obtaining commercial gains, to build hospitals and treat the sick; to build schools to spread the Dharma or teach the original language of the Buddhadharmas; to establish the venues for Dharma activities or group practice for the public; to provide places for others to do retreat, or food and other necessities for practitioners in retreat. These four are all considered noble deeds that can purify negative karma.

In addition, to construct stupas, make tsa-tsas (figurines of stupa or buddhas), perform fire offering, prostration, the seven-branch prayer, and so on are also noble deeds. But we need to pay attention to one thing. The requirement for conducting fire offering or tsok (feast offering) is quite high; the practitioner must have achieved certain stability in meditation as well as accomplishment in the generation and completion stages. It is true the practice of fire offering and tsok can purify many obscurations if all the preconditions are met. However, nowadays in many places, it is more popular to do fire offering by just piling up lots of foodstuff and throwing them into the fire. This is not an authentic fire offering or tsok practice, merely a formality devoid of its original spirit.

The sutras also mention life release specifically, which attests to its importance as a purification practice. However, when we undertake this activity, our aim should never be to purify our

own negative karma, but to resolve the temporary suffering (the purpose of giving of protection) and ultimate peace and happiness (the purpose of giving of Dharma) of beings. If we only act for our own sake, despite having certain merit, we will not fully benefit from undertaking the virtuous action because our motivation is not pure.

Whereas Sakyamuni Buddha, from the time of generating his initial aspiration to benefit sentient beings to the time of attaining enlightenment, never considered his own interest, only that of others. Nevertheless, he transcended cyclic existence for himself while devoting his life to benefitting other beings.

On the contrary, from time immemorial until now, we have not paid attention to the interest of others; whatever we say or do has been to secure our own happiness. But to date we have gained nothing for ourselves, not even the right to control our own destiny. Obviously, there is no value in all the effort made toward satisfying self-interest. It is only when we endeavor purely for the sake of other beings that our own interest can be taken care of satisfactorily.

Additionally, to hear the Dharma teachings is also considered one of the great deeds. Whether one understands the teaching or not, as long as one makes the effort to attend and hear the profound teachings, it is always meritorious.

Similarly, to provide places to gather, living quarters, copies of texts, food and other necessities for people who come to hear the teachings is also a great deed as well. Here, the texts refer to all the sutras of the Great and Lesser Vehicles, as well as expositions of Buddhist philosophy on the Four Noble Truths, the Middle Way, and the likes.

The aforementioned methods of purification were compiled from related contents in the tantras by the great Nyingma master Rongzom Pandita. I have only introduced the parts that are easy to understand and apply. There are many other methods

which require the practice of generation and completion stages as the foundation. They are beyond what beginners can handle and are thus excluded from the discussion here for the time being.

Among the methods mentioned above, the bodhicitta and Vajrasattva practices are rather easy to grasp. Whether one can purify negative karma primarily depends on one's own diligence. The practice of emptiness is still somewhat beyond our ability at the moment, but we can try to ease into it after completion of the preliminary practices. As for the great deeds, some require certain financial capability to accomplish but some don't, so money is not the issue. Whether one can purify negative karma really depends on one's spiritual practice rather than material wealth. Especially with life release events which we have many opportunities to participate every year, and which people actively attend; if only we can modify our motivations for joining these activities, all negative karma accumulated from beginningless time can certainly be purified.

It would be best if we can execute all the virtuous actions above for purification, but it is not necessary to do all. To practice just one perfectly is enough to achieve full purification. On the other hand, with virtuous deeds, it's always the more we do the better, so we should make every effort to do as much as possible.

## CONCLUSION

The Buddha once said there are two types of people that deserve praise: those who keep vows completely pure, that is, who never break a vow; those who break vows but repent immediately and do everything they can to restore their vows.

Atisha once said, "I have never violated the pratimoksha vows, but I have violated the bodhisattva vows on occasion and

the tantric vows many times." As Atisha is the embodiment of the Buddha, he could not possibly have committed such downfalls, so the purpose of his statement was to emphasize the hierarchical significance of the three types of precepts and remind followers to take caution before making tantric commitments. We should receive tantric vows only when we have sufficient confidence in upholding them; if keeping the tantric vows pure is difficult, we should receive the less stringent precepts first and wait for conditions to mature before taking the tantric vows.

However, Atisha continued to say, "Although I have broken vows, I have never allowed a transgression to go uncorrected overnight." That means no matter which vow was violated, Atisha always made a point of repenting his fault thoroughly within twenty four hours.

It is hard not to break any vow, but a broken vow can be restored if we take all incidents of transgression seriously and proceed to offer penitence with due respect. Therefore, both types of people praised by the Buddha can attain liberation. Of course, in terms of the speed of attaining liberation, there is a marked difference between those who never break a vow and those who commit violations but repent afterwards. Therefore, we should still place ourselves on high alert to identify and destroy any cause that might possibly lead to vow downfalls before it even has a chance to materialize.

In case a vow is broken, repent immediately. Even if we cannot be sure of keeping our vows completely pure, we must at least not refuse to repent. If we allow negative karma to grow unimpeded, there may not be any remedy left to turn things around at the end. The bodhicitta and Vajrasattva practices are both easy and powerful methods of purification through which our negative karma can be purified. I believe all wise people know best what to do. The decision is actually in our own hands.

## Glossary

**Alikākāravāda (False Aspectarians)**—One of the two systems of Yogācāra. A debate about the reality of mental appearances led to the subdivision of Yogācāra. According to Alikākāravāda, neither phenomena nor appearances in the mind that reflect them really exist. What exists in reality is the luminous mind.

**Ātman**—a Sanskrit word that means “self” or “breath”; it is used in Hinduism to describe the concept of the inner Self.

**Bardo Thodol**—*Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State*, authored by the noble Padmasambhava, is revealed by Karma Lingpa, a Nyingma literature best known in the West as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Described in great detail is the entire process of death that spans the dissolution of the body, the 49 days of wandering in the intermediate state, and the final outcome either of liberation or rebirth in one of the six realms.

**Bhūmi**—refers to the ten stages a bodhisattva advances through on the path to become a buddha.

**Chöd**—an advanced tantric practice that combines the prajnaparamita teachings with the practice of lojong (mind training). Chöd means “cutting through,” that is, severing mistaken concepts of the world of appearances and all illusions regarding the existence of a personal self.

**Chönyi bardo**—the bardo of dharmata. The fifth bardo of the luminosity of the true nature which starts after the final ‘inner breath’. Within this bardo, vision and auditory phenomena

occur.

**Dharmadhatu**—Realm of the Dharma; it is the purified mind in its natural state, the nature of mind, free of obscurations.

**Dōngmì**—Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, refers to the Shingon School in Japan; it was established by the Buddhist monk named Kūkai who travelled to China in 804 to study esoteric Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty.

**Dzogchen**—an abbreviation of the Tibetan word Dzopachenpo; ‘dzogpa’ means ‘complete’, ‘chenpo’ means ‘great’, it is widely translated as ‘Great Perfection’. Dzogchen can be traced to two original Sanskrit terms. The first is *Mahasandhi* which means the quintessence, signifying that Dzogchen is the very essence of all teachings. The second is *Atiyoga*; *Ati* indicates the topmost or zenith. *Atiyoga* or Dzogchen is the zenith of all yanas or vehicles.

**Five hellish deeds**—The five kinds of transgression are killing one’s father, killing one’s mother, killing an arhat, harming the Buddha, and destroying the sangha. Since these actions are the most serious of all transgressions, any one action leads to instant rebirth in hell.

**Four or eight dhyanas**—The four dhyanas are the four levels of meditation in the form realm; the eight dhyanas are the four levels of meditation in the form realm and the four levels of meditation in the formless realm.

**Four ways of gathering disciples**—being generous, speaking kindly, giving encouragement, acting according to what one teaches.

**Guhyagarbha Tantra**—The fuller title is the *Web of Magical Illusion, The Secret Essence Definitive Nature Just as It Is*. Alternatively, it can be condensed to the title of *Tantra of the Web of Magical Illusion*. It is the main tantra of the Mahayoga.

**Jigme Lingpa (1729-1798)**—He was a *tertön* of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, and the promulgator of the

*Longchen Nyingthik*, the Heart Essence teachings of Longchenpa. The *Longchen Nyingthik* eventually became the most famous and widely practiced cycle of Dzongchen teachings. Jigme Lingpa was also the major precursor of the Rimé movement.

**Jonang School**—It is one of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism; its origins can be traced to the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Jonang tradition combines two specific teachings: the Zhentong Madhyamaka philosophy and the *Kalacakra Tantra*.

**Kālacakra Tantra**—Kālacakra is classified as a Mother Tantra within Highest Yoga Tantra in Tibetan Buddhism. *Kala* denotes time—not linear, but like our concept of space; it contains all movements of things in the past, present, and future; it does not signify a specific direction or place. The Kālacakra deity represents wisdom; since it is conjoined with the three times, it is all knowing. *Cakra* denotes wheel, not only the wheel of time, but also the mode in which the unsurpassed bliss of attaining buddhahood pervades like the sun over all sentient beings. *Cakra* is unarising and unceasing; it is also a symbol of the Dharma. There are three types of Kālacakra that exist concurrently: external, the physical world outside; internal, the subtle nature of one’s body; and alternative, the path to actualizing buddhahood. The Kālacakra was taught by Sakyamuni Buddha at the request of Suchandra, king of Shambhala, in Amaravati in southeastern India. When the Buddha manifested as the Kālacakra deity, the Kālacakra mandala also appeared. The mandala is the abode of the deity, supported beneath by Mount Meru; inside are palaces, objects of offering, and the deity. Within the mandala are 722 deities, all of which are different expressions of the enlightened mind.

**Kangyur**—“Translation of the Word” consists of works in 1169 texts, 101-120 volumes supposed to have been spoken by the Buddha himself. With Tengyur, the two form the basis of Tibetan Buddhist canon.

**Kapala**—Sanskrit for “skull”; a cup made from a human skull and used as a ritual object.

**Madhyamaka (Middle Way)**—one of the two foundational doctrinal systems of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, which flourished from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE to the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries when Buddhism disappeared from the subcontinent. It took root in Tibet in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, where it served as the cornerstone of all the scholastically inclined Buddhist sects.

**Longchenpa (1308-1364)**—also known as Longchen Rabjam or Drimé Özer, was one of the most brilliant and prominent teachers of the Nyingma lineage. He systematized the Nyingma teachings in his ‘Seven Treasures’, wrote extensively on Dzogchen, and transmitted the Longchen Nyingtik cycle of teachings and practice.

**Relative truth**—It describes our daily experience of a concrete world. As it is difficult for ordinary people to understand absolute reality, relative truth, like the finger pointing to the moon or the boat crossing to the other shore, serves as the necessary means to reach the ultimate understanding of reality.

**Rongzom Pandita**—Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo aka Rongzompa lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Together with Longchenpa and Ju Mipham, he is often considered to be one of the three “omniscient” writers of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. He met Atisa in his youth, who recognized Rongzompa as an emanation of the Indian mahasiddha Krishnacharya.

**Sadhana**—a tantric liturgy, the instructions for carrying out certain practice.

**Samdhinirmocana Sutra**—Sutra of the Explanation of the Profound Secrets.

**Sarvastivada**—an early Buddhist school that upholds “the theory of all exists.”

**Sattva**—(Sanskrit) In Hinduism, it is one of the three types of

innate nature that is present in all things and beings in the world; it means virtue, peacefulness, purity, etc. Later on, it acquired the meaning of mind, or manifestation of mind. In Tibetan Buddhism, it means the mind of courage, denoting the quality of a bodhisattva.

**Satyākāravāda (True Aspectarians)**—One of the two systems of Yogācāra. According to Satyākāravāda, appearances reflected in consciousness have a real existence, because they are of one nature with their creator, the really existent consciousness.

**Sautrantika**—an early Buddhist school whose name literally means “those who rely upon the sutras.”

**Svabhavikakaya**—“essence kaya”, one of the four kayas of a buddha, and constituting the unity of the three kayas.

**Tathāgatagarbha**—the concept of the “womb” or “embryo” (garbha) of the tathāgata, the buddha. Originated in India, it is closely related to the term Buddhadhātu, or buddha-nature.

**Tengyur**—“Translation of Treatises” is the Tibetan collection of commentaries, treatises, and abhidharma on the Buddhist teachings. It comprises 4093 texts in 220-250 volumes. Kangyur and Tengyur form the basis of Tibetan Buddhist canon.

**Tiklé**—(Tibetan; Sanskrit: bindu) vital essence.

**Tögal**—one of the two aspects, along with trekchö, of Dzogchen practice. Translated as ‘direct crossing’ or ‘leap-over’, the practice of tögal can quickly achieve the actual realization of the three kayas in this lifetime. It brings the realization of ‘spontaneous presence’ and can only be undertaken when one has first gained stability in the practice of trekchö.

**Tonglen**—It means ‘sending and receiving’ in Tibetan. As a training on altruism, one practices tonglen by visualizing taking in the suffering of others on the in-breath and giving compassion and succor to all sentient beings on the out-breath.

**Trekchö**—one of the two aspects, along with tögal, of Dzogchen practice. Translated as ‘thoroughly cutting through’



or ‘breakthrough’, it means cutting through delusion with fierce, direct thoroughness. The primordial purity and natural simplicity of the nature of mind is thus revealed.

**Trichiliocosm**—A concept found in the cosmology of Mahayana Buddhism in which the universe is said to be comprised of three thousand clusters of world-systems each of which consists of a thousand worlds.

**Trikaya**—Upon the attainment of buddhahood, enlightenment manifests at three levels which are known as the three bodies (trikaya) of the Buddha: dharmakaya, the Absolute or Truth Body; sambhogakaya, the Enjoyment Body; nirmanakaya, the Emanation Body.

**Tsok**—The Sanskrit word for tsok practice is *ganachakra*, which in Tibetan literal translation is “wheel of accumulation”; it is primarily a practice of offering, but is also a powerful method for purifying the samaya.

**Ultimate truth**—It describes the ultimate reality as sunyata, empty of concrete and inherent characteristics; it is the true reality seen by the divine.

**Yogācāra (Consciousness Only)**—one of the two foundational doctrinal systems of Mahayana Buddhism. The school emerged in India about the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE but gained prominence and greatest productivity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, during the time of Asanga and Vasubandhu.