



**Buddhist Tantra**

*by*

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## Editor's Note

The word “Tantra” is like the smell of durians. You are either drawn to it or you run away from it. There is rarely a neutral view towards it.

I used to think that Buddhist Tantra was mystical rather than logical (I've since discovered I'm wrong); more suited for the advanced meditator who could leap high mountains in a single jump, rather than a cement-footed, struggling beginner like myself. There has also been the confusion and occasional criticism surrounding Tantra, the “Secret Vehicle” amongst even the faithful within the Buddhist community. I have received tantric initiations with faith and gratitude for the “seeds” and imprints of these sacred teachings but often wondered how much progress I could make in it.

All of this led to my respectful request to my Teacher, Geshe Tenzin Zopa, for clarification and guidance. Through his great generosity of Dharma, his patience and his experiential wisdom gained through personal retreats and his 25 years with the great Lama yogi Geshe Lama Konchog, Geshela graciously acceded to the request of this dull-witted one, who is quick to gobble up Dharma but slow to practice. Geshela explains in this book - in the simplest of terms - what Buddhist Tantra is, its authenticity as part of the Buddha's teachings, why we need it, what it involves, what its purpose is, giving an overview of its methods.

Clarity, confidence, conviction and yes, joy about Tantra as taught by the Buddha, is what the reader will distill from Geshela's explanations in this book. It will put the reader on a firm footing

on this topic of Buddhist Tantra and inspire those who are already Buddhist Tantra practitioners, to strive at this noble Path with vigor.

This book is dedicated to our Gurus, the lifeblood of whatever Dharma practice we have, HH Dalai Lama, Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche, HE Dagri Rinpoche and the Wish Fulfilling Jewel Geshe Tenzin Zopa. This is also dedicated to the swift return of the unmistakable reincarnation of Khensur Rinpoche Lhundrup Rigsel.

*Any mistakes in this book are entirely mine*

*huei*

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## **Introduction**

There is a great deal of misconception, misunderstanding and misinformation about Buddhist Tantra. There is confusion between Hindu Tantra and Buddhist Tantra. There is comment and complaint about the appearance of tantric deities; there are whispers of scepticism whether Tantra was actually taught by the Buddha or whether it is mere residual Hinduism or shamanism.

This book is presented with bodhicitta motivation and the wish to dispel misunderstanding about Buddhist Tantra through a simple presentation on this crucial part of Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings.

## **Brief history of the Buddha's teachings**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Turning of the Wheel of Dharma was at Sarnath, where Shakyamuni Buddha taught the 4 Noble Truths to those of the Theravadan inspiration.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Turning of the Wheel was at Rajgir (near Bodhgaya), where the Buddha gave the Mahayana teachings suited to those practitioners who aspired to achieve bodhicitta (great compassion) and wisdom realising emptiness. While doing so, the Buddha simultaneously manifested revealing the teachings on Tantra at Amravati, South India.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> Turning of the Wheel at Vaisali, Buddha gave clarification teachings on the various schools of emptiness and in particular,



clarified the Cittamatra view.

After the Buddha passed away, for a period of about 400 years, the first 2 yantras (the Hearer and Solitary Realiser practices of the Theravadan tradition) were already well established in India, with many supporting institutions. The Mahayana practitioners were scattered and its Vajrayana practitioners had taken to doing their practices in caves and in forests, such that Vajrayana was seen less and less in open society and become increasingly hidden from the ordinary world. It came to a stage where there was even criticism by followers of the first 2 yantras that the Mahayana was like a sky-flower i.e. a fantasy; there was confusion as to whether Buddhist tantra was part of the Buddha's teachings. Then came the illustrious scholar and master Nagarjuna of Nalanda, who

was prophesied by the Buddha himself and restored the Mahayana.

At this juncture, it is relevant to point out that Tibetan Buddhism is of the Mahayana tradition, which contains both the Sutra and Tantra teachings by the Buddha. Hence, the term “Vajrayana” that is popularly used to denote Tibetan Buddhism, is not entirely correct. Tibetan Buddhism is Mahayana in its totality i.e. it preserved both the Sutra and Tantra teachings as taught by the Buddha and is not a creation Tibetans!

## **Buddhist Tantra is different**

from Hindu Tantra

It needs to be understood that Buddhist Tantra is totally different from Hindu tantra. In more recent times, there were people from various countries in the East and the West who went to India, encountered some Hindu Tantra teachings, returned to their countries and conducted workshops on how increase sensual pleasure through tantra! This is how confusion and complaint about Tantra has come about.

We hear a lot about tantra and see the term “tantra” in many books or on the internet. Yet there is limited understanding of what this is. We might even feel it is not relevant to Buddhism. To clarify this, the bare term of “tantra” is used by Buddhists, Hindus and others. However, the meaning and purpose,

the characteristics and the methods of tantra as taught by the Buddha and that of Hinduism, not to mention the modern-day versions created by all sorts of people, are totally different. Even the motivation for Buddhist tantra practice is completely different from other tantras and most certainly, the attainments are also completely different! You need to be clear on this.

The purpose of Buddhist Tantra is to eliminate samsaric existence within oneself and all beings and to actualise enlightenment. The motivation for Hindu tantra - as I understand it - is to overcome this life's temporary experience of suffering.

In philosophical terms, the Hindu motivation for tantra is to overcome the suffering of suffering and suffering of change. For Buddhists, the goal

is to overcome the suffering of suffering , the suffering of change AND pervasive suffering as well. Without eradicating pervasive suffering, we may attain higher rebirths including the god-states and attain the highest peak of samsara (4<sup>th</sup> stage of the Formless state of concentration) and remain there thousands and thousands of years but if we do not uproot karma and delusions (including their subtlest form), we cannot gain liberation from samsara, let alone attain enlightenment. Merely to have the urge to be free from the suffering of suffering, is something that even animals, hell beings and pretas have. Similarly with suffering of change – all beings hope for this, including free thinkers. However, as Buddhists, we strive to be free from all 3 forms of sufferings (i.e. including pervasive suffering) and the entire aspects of samsara.

**Buddhist tantra is premised on morality, discipline and the principles of renunciation, bodhicitta and wisdom realising emptiness. Any practice that claims to be Tantra practice but which does not involve ALL these principles is NOT Buddhist Tantra.** Even if there may be the outward practices of chanting mantras and actions which take on the “appearance” of tantra, they are not part of Buddhist tantra if they are not firmly based on the above key principles. Merely having a kind heart and chanting mantras is not a Buddhist practice and certainly not Buddhist Tantra.

In summary, whilst other traditions of tantra focus on escaping this life’s suffering and even heightening sensual pleasure, Buddhist Tantra has nothing to do with gross bliss and ordinariness. It is abandoning samsara for self

and others and attaining enlightenment. Based on pure morality, discipline, renunciation, bodhicitta and wisdom realising emptiness, meditation is used to activate the subtle clear light mind of one's consciousness. This clear light mind is then directed towards the meditation on emptiness to accomplish direct realisations on emptiness right there. Without direct realisations on emptiness, enlightenment will not be possible. Therefore, one can already see the total difference between Buddhist Tantra and other tantras. One should not mix Buddhist Tantra with practices of others.

Although some Chinese Mahayana practitioners assert that they do not practice tantra, in fact, they do. For example, the famous Om Mani Padme Hum and the long Kuan Yin mantra (Tar Pei Jou) - both of these are mantras and

part of the Vajrayana practice. The meaning of the 6 syllable mantra as taught in the Chinese Mahayana system is the same as that taught in the Vajrayana/Mantra Vehicle. Due to the fact that the Mantra Vehicle practices were well preserved in Tibet, this gave rise to people calling Tibetan Buddhism “Vajrayana”. Hence, the mistaken opinion that Vajrayana or the Mantra Vehicle is a Tibetan Lamas’ creation, rather than as part of the Mahayana Dharma that originated from the Buddha himself.



## What is Buddhist Tantra?

**In essence, Buddhist Tantra is the meditative practice of activating the clear light mind to gain direct realisations into emptiness, in order to eradicate all subtle defilements and attain enlightenment. Its practice requires a foundation in morality, discipline, renunciation, great compassion and wisdom realising emptiness as taught by the Buddha.**

The meaning of the word Tantra can be explained in a few different ways. The commonly used explanation is that “tantra” means “a continuum”, of which there are 3 aspects – the base, the path and the result.

- The base refers to the person who practises tantra;

- The path is the technique which purifies the base (person) e.g. in the lower tantra, there are the yogas with and without sign which target purification; whereas in the Highest Yoga Tantra (HYT), the \*generation stage and completion stage practices form the path which purifies the base through purifying the defilements which obscure realisations of the suchness of mind. Purification here includes the total purification of the obscuration to omniscience.
- The result is the Buddha's Truth Body (Dharmakaya) which is the state of the total extinguishing of all defilements like Buddha Vajradhara.

Tantra practice involves the continuous

purification of the base/self using the meditative techniques of the generation and completion stage of the HYT to eliminate subtle defilements and accomplish the Wisdom Truth Body of the Buddha.

**\*Generation stage** : Having taken an initiation, one is allowed to do the practice of generating oneself as the Buddha deity's form; holding one's mind as the deity's mind and one's speech as the deity's speech and viewing all living beings as deities. The generation stage practice involves the practice of purifying and transforming ordinary birth, the intermediate state and death into the 3 bodies of the Buddha—the Dharmakaya (Buddha's Wisdom Truth Body), the Enjoyment Body (sambogakaya visible to only Bodhisattvas) and the Emanation Body (nirmanakaya, visible to ordinary sentient beings).

**Completion stage:** Unless one has received a HYT initiation, it would not be possible to go into the details on the practice of this but generally speaking, this stage of practice involves the training of the inner winds, chakras and drops. By stimulating these, it enables one to control one's subtle inner wind upon which mind rides upon. By doing so, one is able to gather all the inner winds and guide them into the central channel and then perform the 3 activities of (1) establish the subtle wind in the central channel (2) dissolve it there and (3) sustain it there. By doing this, one is able to experience the spontaneous bliss and clear light mind, which brings about an intense clarity of mind to meditate on emptiness. The successful completion of this meditation will erase all subtle defilements and render enlightenment at hand.

Tantra is also called the Mantra Vehicle: “Mantra” means “mind protection” i.e. protecting the mind from ordinary appearances (gross sensations) and conceptions (mistaken views due to ignorance). When we refer to the word “mind”, although there are different Buddhist philosophical schools’ views on this, mind here refers to all the 6 consciousness namely, that in relation to the 5 sense organs and mind.

The purpose of Buddhist Tantra is to overcome samsara for not only oneself but all sentient beings. By applying Buddha’s teachings and meditative techniques, in particular, those of the HYT, the practitioner is able to purify and eradicate not only the obscurations to liberation but the more deep-rooted, obscurations to omniscience.

In *the Vajrapani Initiation Tantra*, it is stated “This very vast, very profound mandala of the great retention mantras of the great bodhisattvas, difficult to penetrate , more secret than the secret , which is not fit to be shown to sinful sentient beings, has been mentioned very rarely by you, Oh Vajrapani. How can it be explained to sentient beings who have not heard it before?”

Vajrapani replied, “Manjushri, those bodhisattvas who practice the bodhicitta deeds through the approach of Secret Mantra (Tantra) , when they have engaged in and achieved cultivation of the altruistic mind of enlightenment , may enter the mandala of retention mantras (Tantra) where the initiation for great wisdom is bestowed . Those who have not completely achieved this are not to enter.

They should not be shown seals (hand symbols) nor secret mantras (Tantra).”

Therefore, the Buddhas and great masters have consistently advised that before engaging in Tantra, one needs to train in bodhicitta and emptiness and only then, enter a mandala of deity i.e. take an initiation of a deity. The stages of training in the aspirational and engaging bodhicitta are premised on properly relying on a qualified Mahayana Teacher , through one’s thoughts and actions.

Lama Tsongkhapa stated: “The Guru will teach the ways in which leisure is meaningful and difficult to find (i.e. the obtaining of the precious human rebirth) and through training the mind in this, a great wish to extract the essence of this life of leisure will be generated. The best means

to do so is to enter the Mahayana. The door of entry to the Mahayana is just the altruistic mind of enlightenment (bodhicitta) because, if this altruistic mind is firmly in your mental continuum, your being a Mahayanist is not artificial; whereas if it is only verbal, your being a Mahayanist is also only verbal. Therefore, an intelligent person should gradually remove whatever is discordant with the altruistic mind of enlightenment and generate it, with all its characteristics”.

If you do not turn your mind away from being attached to this life's concerns, it will be a big obstacle to spiritual cultivation, whether one is on the Hinayana or Mahayana paths and a very serious obstacle for those on the Tantra path . You should be mindful of death, in the sense that you will not stay long in this life and



should think how after death you may wander to lower migrations. This will help you to filter out that which is important and that which is not. Any great interest that you might have in relation to the marvels of a future life, can be overcome by thinking about the faults of all cyclic existence. This will direct your mind towards liberation from samsara as a whole. After arriving at this point, to overcome the attitude of seeking lasting peace for yourself alone, you must train for a long time in unconditional love & compassion and the altruistic mind of enlightenment (bodhicitta).

Next, you should come to know the bodhisattva deeds and generate a wish to train in them. If you can bear the burden of the deeds of bodhisattvas, you should take the bodhisattva vows and practice its precepts. Then, if you can

take on the burden of the pledges and vows of the Vajra Vehicles (Tantra or Mantra Vehicle) you should study and cultivate Ashvaghosha's "Fifty Stanzas on the Guru" (this is the renowned text on guru devotion) and having purified the modes of reliance on a Guru, enter into Tantra.

The "Fifty Stanzas on the Guru" is to be explained to one who has gone for refuge in the Triple Gem, is trained in pure thought, namely the altruistic mind of enlightenment and who has taken the uncommon refuge, namely taking refuge on the basis of the Guru-Deity, during an Initiation. After this, the recipient is turned into a vessel suitable for Tantra.

Rahulashrimitra's advised: "At a time of joy, the student with pressed palms and bending down,

should confess all his sins and take refuge in the Three Jewels. He should practice well the mind of enlightenment and take the lay and bodhicitta vows; engage in purification and renewal of damaged vows previously taken. In concordant stages, he should rely in excellent ways on a Vajra master. Having done all this he should ask his guru, “Please bestow initiation on me”.

The above verse teaches that prior to initiation, one should take the vows of individual liberation, generate an altruistic mind of enlightenment and the Bodhisattva vows. Then petition the Guru for the bestowal of initiation. For a lay person, the “purification” means the purification of transgressions of vows previously taken and renewal refers to the restoring of damaged vows to purity; for a

monk who is entering into the Mantra Vehicle, he must keep in purity, the vows of a novice and so on.

The first chapter of Aryadeva's "Lamp Compendium of Practice" it is said that one should train in stages and not in everything at once, "The stages are these: First one train in the thought of the causal vehicle (the Bodhisattva Vehicle). When one has done so, train in the Resultant Vehicle (Mantra Vehicle), the most subtle, meditative stabilization of single mindfulness" .

## **What does the practice of Buddhist tantra utilise?**

In each of us, there is the gross nervous system and the subtle, inner nervous system. This subtle inner nervous system is not detectable by medical equipment but is perceivable during meditation. It consists of inner channels, channel knots, drops, winds and mind. There are 3 channels through which the inner winds flow, a central channel and a channel on either side of the central channel; the channel knots (chakras) are where the channels coil around each other in a knot and these arise at various points along the central channel; the drops relate to the father-substance and mother-substance from birth-time; the inner wind is the mount of the mind.

The mind rides on this inner wind, like a horse-rider. If we can work with the inner nervous system and tame the wind, we can guide the mind. Since enlightenment is dependent on freeing the mind from samsara and the two obscurations to liberation and enlightenment respectively, you can see how important it is to access and effectively steer the mind.

Inner wind is affected by gross wind (which is the breath), as well as the flow of the wind element throughout the gross body system. Gross wind in turn is affected by gross nervous system. The gross nervous system is connected to the gross fluids in our body, particularly the brain. The gross white drop i.e. the residual father-substance, resides in the crown; the gross red-drop which is the residual mother-substance resides in navel chakra; and the

subtle indestructible drop (the fusion of the subtle mother and father substances) resides in the heart chakra. When one's gross form is affected, the subtle system can be affected, which in turn affects the clear light mind.

In the Vinaya Sutra, it is stated that the mind that enters into this indestructible drop is called the spirit of the mind. We can also refer to it simply as "mind". Mind **is very subtle and is in the manner of an inner wind. This Life-Bearing Wind**, which resides at the heart chakra, is clear and capable of cognition. At the time of death, all the inner winds ultimately dissolve into this Life Bearing Wind and right there, the clear light is experienced.

There are 3 channels – the central channel, the right channel and the left channel. Through

meditation, one is able to gather the winds into the central channel, which gives rise to a heightened concentration, that if applied to the meditation on emptiness, is able to eliminate subtle defilements i.e. eliminate ignorance totally; the winds in the right and left channels are related to the minds of anger and attachment. Therefore, meditation on the winds going through the 3 channels helps one to train in concentration towards eliminating the 3 poisons of ignorance, anger and attachment. The ultimate purpose of tantric meditation is to activate the clear light mind, which is the most subtle mind that is capable of limitless clarity and penetration and to utilise that mind to meditate on emptiness and destroy all delusions and obscurations. Teachings on the channels, drops and winds in themselves have no great significance. However, they



become profound practices only when they are motivated by bodhicitta and conjoined with a realization of emptiness.

At death, a trained Buddhist Tantra practitioner can utilise the natural clear light experience (one of the naturally occurring states during the death process) and transform that into a meditative clear light mind, which can then be used to meditate on emptiness and actualise the Buddha's Wisdom Truth Body right there. When alive, one requires a great deal of effort to reach the clear light mind. But at death, when the natural clear light mind arises, a train practitioner can seize that moment as a precious opportunity to gain realisations.

For a more detailed understanding of the inner winds, channels and chakras, one needs to

be initiated into the Highest Yoga Tantra and thereby be permitted to read Commentaries and related texts on the subject.

## **The relevance of the 8 stages of dissolution**

It has been mentioned above that the naturally arising clear light mind manifests during the death process where the 8 stages of dissolution occur. The first four stages relate to the dissolution of the elements in relation to the body. The next 4 stages relate to the dissolutions in relation to one's consciousness:

**( 1 ) First stage of simultaneous dissolution (simultaneous because many aspects of the dying person are degenerating at the same time)**

**The element that dissolves first is the “earth element”,** which will give way to the water element and relates to *the aggregate of form*. The external sign is that one's body becomes very thin, with one's body feeling

very heavy as if sinking beneath the earth or as if the whole mountain is pressing onto you or that you have fallen into the crater after an earthquake, sinking deeper and deeper into the hole, ambushed by colossal broken pieces of mountain rocks of various sizes. These are the gross sensations.

*The internal sign* is that one starts to have inner visions like mirage, the appearance of shimmering water in the distance. If you happen to go to the desert in the very hot sun, when you look on the sand in the distance, there appears an image of a pool of water there. This is only the reflection of the sun onto the sand. The inner vision of appearance of mirage is the first sign to occur when the death process begins.

At the same time, the basic mirror-like wisdom that one has i.e. the ordinary consciousness that is able to perceive many objects simultaneously starts to degenerate.

When this basic mirror-like wisdom degenerates, one's sight becomes unclear and dark. Objects of sight cannot be seen clearly and it is not because one has watched too much television or was at the computer too much. Here it is a natural, physical experience degeneration of that occurs during the death process.

Corresponding to this, the five senses also degenerate alongside the dissolution process. The first one is *the eye sense* - one cannot open or close the eyes easily. At the time of dying, once the eyes are open, one does not have the strength to close them. Once one closes

them, one does not have the strength to open them again. The ability of the eye senses to focus on the colour and shape of objects gets diminished.

## **( 2 ) Second stage of simultaneous Dissolution**

**The second dissolution is of the water element,** which will give way to the fire element. The external sign is that one's saliva, sweat, urine, blood and bodily fluids begin to dry up and one begins to feel very hot. At the same time, one will experience that oneself is being drawn into the ocean, with no escape, feeling totally helpless. One feels that one is drowning, totally encircled by the strong swirling energy of water, dragging oneself to the deepest bed of the ocean. There is no solid entity to hold

onto, only water.

The *internal sign* or vision is the appearance of smoke, just like we see in the incense puja and how smoke appears.

In terms of the aggregates, *the aggregate of feeling*, namely that of pleasure, pain and neutrality (feelings of joy, suffering and indifference) are no longer felt. A sense of being totally blank is experienced.

The internal sign of the appearance of smoke correlates with the Basic Wisdom of Equality i.e. the ability of our ordinary consciousness to recognize pleasure, pain and neutrality. One feels detached from one's mind.

In terms of the five sense, *the "ear sense"* is

dissolving. External sounds can no longer be heard and even the buzzing in the ears cease. One no longer hears external or internal sounds. At this time, the practitioner should remember that is the experience of the second stage of dissolution of the water element.

Instead of being overwhelmed by fear when experiencing these signs, one should transform them into the practice.

### **( 3 ) Third stage of simultaneous dissolution**

**The involves the dissolution of the fire element,** giving way to the wind element.

The *external sign* is that one cannot digest food or drinks. Digestion weakens because the fire element is beginning to disintegrate, giving



way to the wind element. At this time, one is no longer mindful of even close relationships because the *aggregate of discrimination* (which enables us to recognize people and our relationships with them) degenerates at this stage. One will not even remember one's family members. One is totally cut-off from those memories. One loses the capacity to distinguish between close relatives, friends and other people; one forgets the names of people and objects.

The *internal sign* is the appearance of fireflies or the sparks within the smoke. Like when we do Incense Puja, one can clearly see sparks within the smoke.

Here, *the basic wisdom of analysis* which in one's ordinary consciousness is able to recognize and

distinguish between persons and the level of closeness, remember names and so forth, is lost. At that time, even if one wanted to call somebody or wanted to send a last message, one would not be able to remember the name nor the number.

In terms of the senses, the nose sense degenerates. Inhalation becomes weak and exhalation becomes stronger and longer. If you look at a dying person, the inhalation tends to be very short but the exhalation is very long.

#### **( 4 ) Fourth stage of simultaneous dissolution**

The factor dissolving here is the” wind element.”

The *external sign* is that inhalation and

exhalation ceases. This is because the inner winds begin to move towards the heart. At this time, the person will be declared medically dead (heart & breath stop). However, from the yogic point of view, the death process has not completed yet.

The *internal sign* is the appearance of a spluttering butter-lamp, that is reddish, very bright but whose flame is unsteady. It is reddish and very bright but unsteady. Some texts describe the appearance of the spluttering butter-lamp about to go out.

*The aggregate of compositional factors* degenerates.

**The basic wisdom of achieving activities**, i.e. one's ordinary consciousness that is mindful of

external activities, their purpose and so forth, completely ceases. Even if somebody wants to remind oneself of things or plays a CD of Amitabha mantra, there is no hearing sense. Someone may try to place a holy picture for one to see but no sight is possible.

The “*tongue sense*” degenerates. The external sign of this is that the tongue becomes thick and short. The root of the tongue becomes blue and the tongue shrinks. I saw this when my late master passed away. It shrank to the point where the tongue seemed totally lost. He reminded us that the appearance of mirage is appearing now. When mirage appears, most of us ordinary beings are already helpless and find it difficult to practice. That morning, my master’s exhalation was very long and inhalation very short. I thought that he was

already dying. We all rushed to Him and He said, “No. I will not die till tonight. Go back”. That night, He was quite calm. He said, “The sign of mirage is appearing. Now we shall start the prayers. Sign of mirage is appearing.” Even at this stage, His mind was very stable and clear. This is a very simple yet clear example that consistent and deep training in the causal stage presents great opportunities to actualize the resultant dharmakaya. He did it. He went into clear light meditation. I saw the tongue shrinking. I opened his mouth and could not see the tongue. However, during the cremation, the entire tongue was there! After cremation, amongst the ashes, the whole tongue was there. It’s amazing!

Q: If a person is in coma, will the person still experience all these signs.

Ans: Whether one is in a coma or not, when death occurs, all the external and internal signs are experienced. The length of appearance of the signs can be long or short. For some people, it could even take months. That is why I said, it may be that we have already started. The moment we take birth, we are already heading towards death. Similarly with our skin. As the earth element dissolves, our skin becomes very rough, loose and very dry, requiring us to apply cream.

**Q: A person who is clinically dead i.e. breathing has stopped, brain activity has stopped by earth element may still be intact - how would this person be aware of the external & internal signs?**

**Ans:** *Although that person may not be able*

*to experience things through the bodily senses, the subconscious mind remains alert in all these experiences. This brings a lot of fear and negative thoughts of anger, attachment or ignorance. The fear itself is negative. The practitioner should strive to remain steady, have a clear and concentrated mind that is undisturbed by the dissolutions.*

At this point, the first 4 stages in relation to the body i.e. the dissolution of the elements has occurred. One is pronounced clinically dead at this stage. However, the teachings state that the death process is not yet complete until the next 4 stages of dissolutions which relate to the dissolution in relation to consciousness, occur.

The first three of the 4 remaining appearances

are the white appearance, the red appearance and black near-attainment appearance, which appear before one gets into the clear-light mind stage. Just before the clear light mind stage, the 80 conceptual thoughts also dissolve (i.e. during the 7th stage).

### **( 5 ) The fifth stage of simultaneous dissolution – white appearance**

Factor dissolving here is the mind of white appearance, where the wind in the right and left channels **below** the heart enter the central channel at the base of the spinal chord. The internal sign is of a very clear vacuity filled with white light. The white light is in relation to the descent of the white drop (the father substance) from the crown.



## **( 6 ) Sixth stage of simultaneous dissolution – red appearance**

At this time, one should remind that oneself is already clinically dead and that one is entering the sixth stage of dissolution, namely the mind of red appearance now manifests. The red colour is in relation to the red drop (the mother substance) rising up from the navel.

The sixth stage of simultaneous dissolution is described as **the mind of red increase** and the upper and lower winds gather at the heart chakra. The winds exert force at the heart chakra.

The internal sign, the vacuity is filled with redness.

## **( 7 ) Seventh stage of simultaneous dissolution – black near-attainment**

Then we come to the **seventh stage of simultaneous dissolution**, the mind of the black near-attainment. The cause of this appearance is due to the wind in the right and left channel above the heart, entering the central channel. During this process, all inner winds enter into the very subtle Life Bearing Wind in the central channel and into the indestructible drop at the heart. This is also the period where the 80 conceptual thoughts dissolve. All that appears is a vacuity filled by darkness during which the person goes through a sensation of swooning and inner un-consciousness, leaving a totally non dualistic vacuity,

As this black near-attainment stage begins to

dissolve, the mind of the clear light of death arises.

## **(8) The eighth stage of simultaneous dissolution**

**The 8<sup>th</sup> stage of simultaneous dissolution, namely the mind of clear light** , free from the white, red and black appearances. The appearance is like late dawn, clear, bright, without any signs of redness, white nor darkness. A sense of calm, soothing, bliss is experienced within the subtle mind. A trained practitioner can utilise this naturally arising clear light state for meditation on emptiness and the lack of inherent existence. The combination of clear light meditation together with the blissful mind is called the practice of the union of great bliss and emptiness. The practitioner

can remain in this post-death meditation for one day, two days, three days, one week, 10 days or more. It is up to the practitioner. This is the time that can be used by the practitioner to realize emptiness directly, achieve the meditative union of great bliss and emptiness and thereby actualise the Dharmakaya.

At this moment, the consciousness leaves the body. This is the completion of “death” according to the tantra teachings.

From the tantric perspective, the point of actual death is not linked to the inhalation and exhalation but to the appearance of the mind of clear light.

Every person will experience these dissolutions and inner visions as well as this stage of lucid

vacuity for up to three days or more or less depending on the practitioner. The clear light state is the experience which occurs after the death process is complete; clear light meditation is using that experience in the path. Although everyone will experience the clear light state, not everyone knows how to do use the clear light stage to meditate.

After the 8<sup>th</sup> stage of dissolution, when the consciousness departs from the body, there are external signs. They include the red drop in the form of blood from the nose or pinkish or cream discharge and the white drop in the form of a whitish-fluid discharge from the lower body. If the deceased person's body was very weak, it is more likely that there will be the whitish discharge from the secret part/lower part of the body.

Prior to the consciousness leaving the body, any violent handling of the body will disturb the process of the death, possibly resulting in the lower rebirth for the dying person and the caretaker would have committed the karma of interfering with the death process. Therefore if circumstances permit, try not to touch nor move the body after clinical death and if the time comes where the body has to be moved, to touch the crown on the deceased person's body before moving it.

### **After the 8<sup>th</sup> stage of dissolution - When the clear light stage ceases**

When the clear light stage ceases, the consciousness then goes through a reverse process, going through the same prior 7 stages of dissolution, giving rise to an existence as an

intermediate state being i.e. a bardo being (see below).

The mind is subtle. If we do not habituate ourselves with the signs and dissolutions, these signs can be fearsome, especially at the time of death. All are illusions. You are lying on the bed but the appearance of the signs appear to you as real and generate great fear e.g. colossal mountains collapsing onto you. Even at the first dissolution, one can totally freak out, feel totally overwhelmed by fear and negativities. That is how one is thrown into the lower realms such as the hell realms, the hungry ghost realms and the animal realms.

It is important to study Dharma and practice whole-heartedly such that it becomes second nature to you. Receive the proper initiations

from a qualified master, cultivate proper Guru Devotion, abide by ethics, vows and commitments and practice well. In this way, one need not have fear at the time of death. We can actualize the two stages within this causal stage, right now, on this very cushion, within this lifetime.

Bardo-being: The person who has completed the death process enters into the intermediate state as a bardo being and its subtle body can go wherever it likes, through mountains, so forth, in search of a place to take rebirth. It travels unobstructed, except for two places, namely the Bodhgaya's stupa or holy image and the other is the future mother's womb. Other than these two objects, a bardo being can travel anywhere, traverse miles within a microsecond.



The lifespan of the intermediate state can last for a period of 7 days depending whether or not it meets its karmically-linked parent-to-be. If they are not encountered within the first 7 days, the bardo being will undergo a small death, experiencing the 8 signs of the death process as outlined earlier. Then this being will again experience the 8 signs of dissolution in reverse order and be reborn in the second intermediate state. This can happen for a total of 7 rebirths in the intermediate state, making it 49 days during which time a realm of birth will be found.

## **Training in Buddhist Tantra – the criteria and the practice**

If you are starting to read this book only from this chapter, it is worthwhile to start from the beginning of this book because Buddhist Tantra practice requires a foundation in the study and practice of morality, discipline, renunciation, bodhicitta or the great compassion and wisdom realising emptiness. Without an understanding of these vital principles, there will be no results from any Tantra practice.

### **(a) The criteria for training in Buddhist Tantra**

When one is fully matured in or has gathered the conducive causes of :

- Having obtained the precious human rebirth

of the 8 freedoms and 10 endowments

- Having accumulated merits from the past and now using the precious human rebirth to continue accumulating merit
- Having the thorough study and understanding on the common path – the 4 Noble Truths, the 3 Principal Aspects of the Path (renunciation, bodhicitta and wisdom realising emptiness), the practice of calm abiding meditation and special insight meditation
- Having a genuine sense of renunciation towards samsaric existence through seeing the detailed characteristics of the suffering nature of samsara
- Putting sincere effort in developing compassion, loving kindness and a strong sense of responsibility to help others and liberate sentient beings;
- Having a clear understanding the faults of

the dualistic mind and the belief in inherent existence, which is the root to all samsara

- Discovering that the true nature of existence is dependent-arising and the total absence of inherent existence.

Upon this basis of having a firm foundation on the common path and continuously doing virtuous deeds in accordance with the Dharma, one will reap the result of meeting a perfectly qualified, realised Tantric Guru and receive the permission (through Initiation) into the doctrine and practices of the Mantra Vehicle.

### **(b) The practice of Buddhist Tantra – in general**

Once one has gained the proper foundation in the Buddha's teachings as stated above and has received the proper initiation from a

perfectly qualified Mahayana master, one can then begin on the deity yoga practice on the Buddha-deity whose mandala and practices that one has been initiated into.

Tantra is called the resultant path because one does meditative practices to simulate the qualities of the resultant Buddha, utilise the methods of the generation stage and completion stage in order to overcome defilements and achieve enlightenment.

There are 2 factors while training in tantra meditation: Cultivating (1) divine pride (Tib. “lhai nagyal”) and (2) vivid appearance of the deity.

The cultivation of divine pride of oneself as the Buddha-deity with all his qualities and having

a vivid appearance of oneself as deity, will bring about the protection from ordinariness. Whatever appears to the senses is viewed as the same essence of the deity d.g. whatever form one sees is in the form of an emanation of the deity ; every place, the deity's mandala; every sound, a mantra. Through this, the protection of mind arises and together with the vows taken during the initiation, prevents us from the conceptual (i.e. ignorant view that believes in inherent existence), dualistic appearance. All forms of suffering, including problems with people and circumstances arise due to conceptual, dualistic thinking. Likewise, even one word of mantra is a mind-protection technique – it keeps out delusions and safeguards the mind.

In the word “mantra”, the “man” means

knowledge of suchness; the “tra” originates from “traya” which means “the compassion that protects migrators. Therefore, mantra is the unification of wisdom and compassion which grants protection to migratory beings. It is said that the Mantra Vehicle or Vajrayana is required in one’s spiritual development and superior to the Sutrayana. One should not view this statement as an insulting, deluded, competitive statement. The reason behind the assertion that the Mantra Vehicle is superior is because the practice of achieving the activities of pacification, increase, control and wrathfulness, which are needed to eliminate defilements and benefit sentient beings, are not presented in the Perfection/Sutra Vehicle but are taught in the Mantra Vehicle. Even in the Mantra Vehicle, these 4 activities are not really written nor spoken openly but taught by qualified masters

to qualified disciples secretly. “

The reason for secrecy is that those with negative or impure motivation could use the great power of mantra techniques to harm others and accumulate intense negative karma. For example, if one uses the force of mantras without compassion for all living beings and renunciation towards samsara but merely does so out of the great desire to obtain power and status in this very life, then instead of helping others and taking higher rebirth, one may end up causing harm to others and take a destructive harmful spirit rebirth, which will be difficult to pacify. Therefore, Buddhist Tantra is taught to those who are subdued by Dharma and shown in a hidden manner.

For us to have a deeper understanding of tantra,



it would be good to refer to Lama Tsongkhapa's "*Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*" (Nga Rim Chenmo). He composed 18 great treatises in both sutra and tantra and among the 18, his "Great Exposition to the Common Path" (Lam Rim Chenmo) and the "Great Exposition of Secret Mantra", are the most outstanding. These 2 treatises are able to educate and guide us in an unmistakable manner in the most profound teachings of the Buddha. It is generally advised that for us to even receive the oral transmission on the Nga Rim Chenmo, requires one to have the initiation into all 4 classes of tantra. Otherwise, one would not be qualified to receive the oral transmission of the Great Exposition of Secret Mantra.

## **Why the Buddha taught Tantra**

To accomplish full enlightenment , the practitioner needs to conquer not only the gross defilements but also eliminate the subtlest defilements. To do so, one needs to use the subtlest mind infused with wisdom to be able to penetrate the subtlest defilements. The subtlest wisdom is the Clear Light Wisdom is accessible through tantra practice. After the cessation of the gross mind, the subtlest consciousness experiences bliss. That blissful mind with help of concentration will be able to recognise the reality of the clear light mind, which is ultimate truth.

The concentrated subtle mind unified with the subtle blissful mind, is able to bring about the union of the subtle blissful mind and the

subtle clear light wisdom mind. **This subtle unification mind has the potency of being able to penetrate the subtle defilements and eliminate them. One cannot hope to use one's gross mind to tackle subtle defilements. One needs the subtlest mind to overcome the subtlest defilements that is absolutely necessary for enlightenment to be attained.**

This technique of tapping and utilising the clear light mind is not illustrated in the Sutra Vehicle and can only be found in the Highest Yoga Tantra (HYT) methods via the generation stage and completion stage practices. Thus, Tantra offers the subtle techniques to overcome subtle obscurations and gain omniscience. For one who has spent aeons training in the Sutra path, the final stages will involve engaging the tantra path to eradicate all subtle defilements.

For example in the Perfection Vehicle, the Madhyamika school presents emptiness as the mind having emptiness as the object. When the HYT presents the conventional stage of the completion Illusory Body and in particular, the ultimate stage of the completion Clear Light mind, “ultimate” there does not refer to the object (emptiness) but rather, to the subject (mind) cognising emptiness. The Sutra Vehicle does not present the subtlest cognising mind i.e. the clear light mind, as is done in Tantra. In this aspect, the Sutra Vehicle is said to be incomplete and thus, is unable to offer the method for the total eradication of defilements. However, to be able to use the the clear light mind, one needs to train in the techniques of the HYT. That is why the Tantra teachings were revealed by the Buddha.

However and to reiterate, one needs the foundation in the Sutrayana before beginning on the Mantra Vehicle as it provides vast merits to be accumulated and these merits are integral to meeting the Tantra teachings from qualified Mahayana masters and have the courage to embark upon the practice to actualise realisations and enlightenment. Merely meeting the HYT requires an enormous amount of merit, so it shows that you have accumulated merits from past lifetime. On top of that, if we put much effort, the remaining time of this life into the purification of negative karma, accumulating merits, living the Dharma, applying all the techniques of HYT, then before death comes, enlightenment is possible; and if not achieve in this life, then possibly in the intermediate/ bardo state; if not in the bardo state, then in

the next life. Some deities specially dedicated their prayers to help practitioners in these degenerate times, to create a closer affinity with sentient beings in these degenerate times such that one will be able to attain enlightenment in one lifetime or if not, in 16 lifetimes of perfect, uninterrupted practice.

It can be said that there are 4 yantras – Hearer path, Solitary Realiser Path, Bodhisattvayana and Tantrayana. The Hearer and Solitary Realiser Paths practice compassion but not great compassion/bodhicitta. As between Bodhisattvayana and Tantrayana – the differentiation is not on the bodhicitta aspect as both have it but that Tantra additionally uses the method of transforming of ordinary appearance and cultivating divine pride.

## **The 4 categories of Buddhist Tantra**

In Buddhist Tantra there are four categories of tantra, corresponding to the practitioner's ability and they are:-

- (1) Action/Kriya Tantra – focuses on external practices - an example is the Chenresig Initiation;
- (2) Performance Tantra – focuses on a balance between external and internal activities - an example is the Vairochana Initiation;
- (3) Yoga Tantra – focuses more on internal activities and less of external activities - an example is the Sarvavid Initiation;
- (4) Highest Yoga Tantra (HYT) –focuses on internal activities - examples are the Kalachakra, Yamantaka, Guhyasamaja, Heruka, Vajrayogini Initiations.

Tantra was taught by the Buddha himself and the realised beings after him. Tantra was taught by the Buddha in the form of a monk and also in the form of Vajradhara, who is the central deity of specific mandalas. All 4 classes of tantra were taught by the Buddha and not by ordinary masters:

*Action Tantra* was taught by the Buddha in the aspect of a monk while in the Realm of the 33 Gods on the summit of Mt Meru, as well as in the human world where Manjushri and other Bodhisattvas were the main disciples and listeners.

*Performance Tantra* was taught in the Base and Essence Adorned with Flower Celestial Realm.



*Yoga Tantra* was taught by the Buddha when he arose in the form of the central deity of each mandala in places such as the summit of Mt Meru and in the 5th celestial realm within the Desire realm.

*Highest Yoga Tantra (HYT)* – Maha Anuttarayoga tantra - was taught by Buddha in the land of Orgyen, where the lotus born Padmasambhava was born, having manifested the mandala of Guhyamasamaja.

In the Highest Yoga Tantra category, there are 3 main deities that are practiced namely Guhyasamaja, Heruka and Yamantaka. Guhyasamaja practice is the root of the Father tantra practices and focuses on the method/ bodhicitta practices (its cultivation is said to be more effective in daylight hours); Heruka

practice is the root of the Mother tantra practices and focuses on wisdom/emptiness practices (its cultivation is said to be more effective at night); Yamantaka (the wrathful form of Manjushri, the wisdom aspect of the Buddha is in the category of Father tantra; Vajrayogini is in the category of Mother tantra. Guhyasamaja practice was taught to Indrabhuti by Buddha; Yamantaka practice was requested by Yamantaka's consort Samundhi and taught at time of subduing demonic forces. Hevajra tantra was requested for by Vajragarbha was taught when the Buddha arose in the land of Magadha at the time of destroying the 4 maras. Heruka tantra was requested for by Vajrayogini and Buddha manifested as Heruka and taught it on summit of Mt Meru.

In conventional world, Mt Kailash is considered

to be Mt Meru.

The consistent and pure practice of any of the 4 types of tantra can bring about enlightenment. However, the HYT method is the swiftest method to enlightenment and its main focus is to purify ordinary death, the intermediate state and rebirth, by transforming these three bases into the three bodies of the Buddha and hence achieve enlightenment – i.e. - to transform ordinary death into the Buddha's Wisdom truth Body (Dharmakaya); transform the intermediate state into the Enjoyment Body (the sambogakaya, visible to only Bodhisattvas ) and transform rebirth into the Emanation Body (the nirmanakaya, which is the form that is visible to all sentient beings and is the form that Shakyamuni Buddha took when he dwelled in this world). The method of using meditation

to engage in the transformational process of ordinary death, intermediate state and rebirth into the 3 bodies (kayas) of the Buddha is thus called the “3 kayas practice”.

This is based on the text known as the *Collective Explanations* on the Theory of the Womb. The life of the mind depends on the power of the inner wind energy which every single being possesses.

### **Transformation of the ordinary form**

When one accomplishes the Tantra path, the practitioner’s body transforms. There are a few possibilities:

- (1) The body dissolves into a formless state and one resides as the Wisdom Body;

- (2) The body dissolves into the Wisdom Body and from that Wisdom Body state, arises in a rainbow body, in a luminescent (light) form, hence the different manifestations of Buddha- deities: some peaceful, some wrathful, most carrying implements. The appearances and implements illustrate the different methods of accomplishment.
- (3) Body may disintegrate into relics or after cremation or burial, give rise to relics. That is also a sign of high attainments in tantra. If one has attained full enlightenment – the practitioner will have 5 different colours of relics which represent the total purification of the 5 aggregates and achievement of the 5 Dhyani Buddhas, which each colour representing each of the different Dhyani

Buddhas. Some bodies though cremated, displayed the tongue, heart and eyeball remaining intact. This is the sign of accomplishing the 2 stages of the tantric path of the generation and completion stage. Masters who only recently passed away displayed such signs to prove that relics are not mere legend. One should generate even greater faith upon seeing these.

- (4) Some attain enlightenment this very lifetime while possessing an ordinary human body but allow the physical body to live out the ordinary process but their consciousness is one of omniscience. Hence, an observer can never know who has omniscience. Only the realised practitioner will know.

(5) Some enlightened beings reside in Dharmakaya forms, some in the sambogakaya state; some take birth into the world (i.e. in the nirmanakaya state) within samsara with bodhicitta motivation, in order to guide according to the disposition of sentient beings.

## **Tantric Deities – the symbolism**

Tantric deity images are sometimes peaceful and sometimes wrathful; some are in solitary pose whilst others are in the posture of Father-Mother deities in union. All tantric images - every aspect of them - from the image of the deities themselves, to the implements they carry and the ornaments they wear, are pure symbolism. They have totally nothing to do with ordinary form and samsaric activities.

The appearances and implements illustrate the different methods of accomplishment. The entire manifested form of a deity, from crown to toe including the aura, represent the stages of the paths, techniques and practices of tantra. The ornaments, in particular those made of bones and skulls are the classic representation of impermanence.



The most talked about and misunderstood is the image of the Father-Mother deity in union: Our ordinary minds tend to misinterpret these. In fact, it is not at all about the union of two contaminated, desirous, deluded male and female coming together in sexual union – this is absolutely wrong view!

In fact, the Mother-Father image illustrates that ordinary, desirous sexual indulgence is to be eliminated by the antidote of wisdom and method (bodhicitta) presented in the completion and generation practices of tantra. Wisdom refers to the wisdom realising emptiness, the clear light wisdom represented by the Mother deity; the method is the highest compassionate state of mind namely bodhicitta, represented by the Father deity. All existence arise as merely-labelled and do not inherently exist.

Samsara and nirvana are merely-labelled, yet sentient beings are overwhelmed by samsara and delusions. So the union based on samsaric, desirous attachment is to be eliminated by the unification of wisdom and method.

The deity holding weapons and implements, reminds the practitioner of the different antidotes to be applied to the corresponding defilements e.g the curved-knife is to cut off ignorance; ropes represent mindfulness being needed to tie the mind to virtue in order to tame the wild mind; the skull-cup holding the 5 meats and 5 nectars (body fluids) - whatever view one might have in relation to these, the purpose of such an image is to train us to transform all that is averse to us, into that which is blissful. Likewise, the practitioner trains in transform all adversities into the Path.

Hence, it is not that tantra practice uses bizarre images like skulls and bones and such fearsome objects. These are designed to eliminate ordinary perception and transform our mind to reach our innate nature which is the Buddha nature , the clear light nature, capable of pure, divine view and actions. The moment we are able to do away with ordinary appearance and able to manifest the Buddha nature, clear light mind, that itself is the state of enlightenment.

How did these tantric deity forms come about? Some of these images were verified by the deities themselves through e.g. self-arising images in rock faces, caves (there are many in Tibet and Nepal). Some images appeared to Realised Beings in retreat who then drew images of them and we can rely on them because of

the undisputed standing of those realised themselves e.g. Lama Tsongkhapa had many direct visions of Manjushri and Yamantaka, who then gave detailed descriptions of the images; some deities were requested to put their mark onto rock walls, such as Guru Padmasambhava who came in human form but who was in fact emanation of Manjushri and placed his foot print, hand prints and head prints onto many cave-walls in various places, as a legacy to generate faith and to convince people of their existence. Milarepa who dissolved his form body into the Illusory rainbow body was witnessed by a human community at that time. He too put his foot print into the rocks. Sometimes, when a disciple has profound faith and conviction, deities appear on the basis of (i) the disciple's supplication for the deity to appear and (ii) the disciple is blessed and

gains a perfectly clear and detailed image of the deity.

### **Bliss in Tantra and Its Nature**

The ordinary meaning of words can really create confusion, can't they!! In the context of tantra, "bliss" is not about the ecstasy derived from sexual activities or union. It's not about the sensation that accompanies the peak of sensual pleasure. Thinking of bliss in this way in relation to tantra is **TOTALLY WRONG**. Buddhist tantra is to overcome delusions, not enhance it.

Ordinary bliss is from the sexual organ and is in the nature of the suffering of change. Bliss in tantra, however, is experienced in one's central

channel and is one of pacified joy, clarity and peacefulness, which pervades all channels and the more concentration is placed on that, the bliss increases and can be non-ceasing.

You will recall the earlier chapter on the clear light mind being the most subtle mind which can be utilised to meditate on overcoming subtle defilements and achieve enlightenment itself. In our daily lives, we use the gross mind to engage in all forms of activities and conceptual thought. There are however, brief periods of time when our gross minds are less dominant e.g. during sleep, fainting, orgasm, sneezing. Due to the decline of one's gross mind during these periods, one is briefly able to access the subtle mind and if that happens, there is a sensation of bliss experienced in the central channel. This has a bearing on one's aggregates

because the person then experiences bliss throughout his whole being, including the nervous system.

To touch the clear light mind, the gross mind has to shut down. However, it is very difficult to shut down the gross mind. We are constantly distracted and responding to sense stimuli of all kinds. Therefore, during sleep, fainting or orgasm, our mind is withdrawn to a smaller point and this causes the weakening of the gross mind and momentarily the clear light mind manifests, where bliss may be experienced. However, because these states are natural occurrences and the time-periods are brief, most of us are not sufficiently trained to be able to utilise these periods to meditate. We certainly cannot induce fainting by knocking our heads! As for sleeping, we rarely

have control over it and in fact, sleep tends to control us! Hence, training in tantra meditation is needed.

In tantra, there is reference to the practice of the 4 stages of bliss or the 4 Joys. These are techniques used in the various categories of tantra to shut down the gross mind and to activate the clear light mind.

In the Hevajra Tantra, it is stated:

*Through laughing and looking ,  
Embracing and uniting  
The tantras are of four types.*

The “Four” refer to the 4 categories of tantra of Action , Performance , Yoga and Highest Yoga



Tantras, which utilise the activities of laughing, looking, embracing and (meditative) union of two to derive joy or bliss.

Bliss should arise through positive, virtuous admiration. When doing deity yoga, one is firmly holding divine pride and views all other beings as pure, divine beings. Joy arises at this.

Hence, meditation on 4 Joys in the HYT arises from the 4 types of activities, namely, looking, laughing, embracing and union at the deity, as favourable circumstances for cultivation.

With regard to the initial practitioner of Perfection Vehicle and also of the Mantra vehicle, one is not able to utilise any of the 4 techniques due to one's un-developed

concentration and trainings. Only fully trained, pacified, qualified practitioners of the HYT will be able to practice the 4 Joys on the Path.

With the right motivation of seeking to eliminate defilements through actualising the subtlest wisdom of clear light, one applies the 4 Joys practice to achieve full enlightenment. One begins with generating oneself as the deity, eliminating one's ordinary appearance. From there, one meditates on emptiness and from that wisdom state arises the visualised-wisdom consort. By looking at the visualised-wisdom consort, bliss is generated (a melting sensation is felt from crown down to the throat). When the wisdom consort expresses laughter, the non-conceptual greater bliss is generated (from throat to heart chakra); when oneself embraces the wisdom consort

in meditation one derives bliss (from the heart chakra to navel chakra); when one is in meditative union with the wisdom consort, bliss is experienced (from navel chakra to tip of secret part), generating the supreme great bliss. This stage of practice is described in the scriptures as being “In the manner of insects” meaning that this meditative union of great bliss and emptiness is like those insects generated from wood, whereby the insect eats the wood itself. This analogy is to illustrate that meditative stabilization is generated from bliss (in dependence on desire) and is cultivated as emptiness (whereupon desire is consumed and eliminated).

The generation of bliss is experienced this way, downwards. However, if one releases fluid as a result of this process, a transgression of the vows

occurs. Remember always – Buddhist Tantra is not about ordinary ecstasy, it is about activating the clear light mind to destroy defilements. To further train in this purpose, one reverses the process of the downward-melting sensations – and in so doing, bring back the sensation (and fluid if there was any) upwards through concentration. One therefore practices in this concentration, going up and down. This is done to overcome gross mind and get closer to the subtle mind. When one reaches a sustained, effortless, blissful mind without any influence of gross thoughts, one is very near to or may even be in the clear light state and this is when one uses that blissful concentration mind to meditate on the emptiness of the blissful mind itself and the emptiness of clear light mind, i.e. the emptiness of emptiness.

Channels, drops, winds, mind have to be protected and kept fresh and not be allowed to degenerate. So if a practitioner releases seminal fluid during practice, it harms one's tantric practice. It harms the concentrated clear light practice. Before Lama Tsongkhapa's time, there were tantric practitioners who indulged in ordinary sexual activities, thinking it was beneficial to tantric practice. Lama Tsongkhapa powerfully demonstrated that the supreme basis for success in HYT is perfect Vinaya ethics. He remained a strict upholder of Vinaya vows and accomplished the two stages of generation and completion and attained enlightenment in one lifetime.

For a practitioner well trained in Buddhist tantra, death-time is a precious opportunity to tap into the clear light mind state to do the meditation

on emptiness and free one from samsara right there and even attain enlightenment itself. However, if one is not well trained and only a beginner or if one is seriously ill and thus, very weak, this simple practice can be done :

1. On the basis of faith in the Guru-Buddha and having been initiated into the deity, just think – “I am the Buddha-deity”. Hold the view that one is the deity. This is far better than merely looking at picture of deity, which is “outside” of oneself.
2. There may be the tendency to mentally struggle to find evidence that one is a deity. For this, when lights and colours appear during the dissolution process, identify that light as the deity.

3. Then think, “I am in the state of the deity’s Pureland”. If one can do this, it will be a virtuous, peaceful, protected mind.

If one dies at that time, one is assured of a higher rebirth and even a Pureland rebirth. However, to be able to do even the above few steps, it is advisable for one to practice from now. Hence, before going to sleep, even when one is very tired, visualise oneself as deity and think “I am the deity”. Then if there are any indirect light rays coming into the room, think that the light beam is the deity and think “That’s me in the Pureland” and fall asleep with that thought. It is worthwhile to train this way.

## **Keeping up with Tantric Commitments**

One must train in the common path (the Sutra path) which will then ripen one's karma to meet the Guru. One does not need persuasion from friends to take someone as one's Guru. One should not rely on titles and fame of any master. Instead, one should accumulate all the virtuous causes and put effort into the study, contemplation and meditation on the common path of the Buddhadharma and then without doubt, one will meet the perfect, qualified Mahayana Guru, who will lead one to the right path and the right practice.

When one intends to take an Initiation, one should pay close attention to the instructions given during the Initiation. If one is distracted and mentally blur about the instructions during



an Initiation, it is doubtful whether one has received the Initiation or not. However, if one generates strong faith in the master and has conviction that one has received the initiation, then the Guru-disciple relationship arises from that Initiation and one should abide by all the vows and advice given by the master.

Some Gurus give mantra and sadhana commitments upon conferring initiations, some do not. One should check what the initiation commitments are before taking any initiation.

Some practitioners give up tantra practice due to being overwhelmed by the commitments to be done or the sheer number of mantras to be recited. Let's be realistic – one has accumulated causes for unhappiness and problems since beginningless time, how can reciting a sadhana

for one hour or rolling one mala of mantras a day, be enough to purify all that? Yet there are complaints that Dharma practice is not working or worse, that Dharma practice seems to be bringing in more problems! One never thinks that without Dharma practice, without mantra practice, the sufferings would be more intense and magnified!

The moment you take an Initiation, you enter the supreme Tantra path which enables you to overcome all suffering and attain enlightenment in the swiftest way. However, effort is required. An initiation alone is not enough. It is only the opening of the gate. The complete tantra practice is one where one studies, contemplates and meditates on the 2 stages continuously and lives in the recognition of oneself as deity for 24 hours. By doing so,

it is guaranteed that one will not commit any negative karma because deities do not commit harms nor indulge in delusions. Use different stages of wisdom – mindfulness, introspection, virtues, compassionate mind, understanding of reality - to analyse and challenge delusions and defilements throughout the day.

Seeing oneself as divine and having divine pride is not about supernatural powers but dwelling in the totality of virtue. This will be ultimately beneficial for self and for others. If we are able to live our daily life with great compassion, wisdom realising emptiness, patience, kindness, there would be no need for sadhana, mantras, retreats! To support this assertion, during time of the Nalanda pandits, Nagarjuna did not have a thick Yamantaka sadhana to rely on, yet look at his attainments and the extent of his benefit

to scholars and ordinary beings alike.

Prayer commitments are granted by our vajra/ initiation Gurus out of compassion because unlike in the olden days where distractions were few and supporting practitioners many, we no longer have the good fortune of being able to gain great concentration with ease. The prayer commitments help us with this. Without discipline, we will not only take things for granted, we will simply forget what we are to do or think. There are many factors which can destroy our wisdom. Through doing commitments, one's time will be applied to virtue. Hence, we cannot give up tantra just because it is not convenient for us to carry out all the practices. I am not in a position to say that there is no need for you to do the sadhanas given to you – if your Guru gave you sadhana

or mantra commitments, it is your duty to do them and it will benefit you to do so. My comment is that you have to immerse your life into the practice, i.e. practice 24 hours.

The point is that as long as we take an initiation, we have the commitment to engage in the practice to the point of enlightenment. As a word of comfort, some tantric practices like those in relation to Vajrayogini, even feeble practice will enable one to gain enlightenment in 16 lifetimes. Such is the great kindness of the Buddha-deities.

## **Bodhisattva Vows and Pledges of the 5 Dhyani Buddhas**

Bodhicitta has two aspects (i) Aspiring bodhicitta, which refers to the wish to attain bodhicitta and (ii) Engaging bodhicitta refers to taking the Bodhisattva Vows to engage in the acts of the 6 Perfections and actually doing them.

### **(A) The Bodhisattva Vows - 18 root vows and 46 secondary vows**

#### **18 Root Vows – one commits to abandon:**

1. Praising oneself or belittling others (to make oneself look better).
2. Even though able, not giving material aid or teaching Dharma, due to selfishness

3. Not forgiving others but harbouring a grudge and holding it even when they apologise. Best practice is to hold them as one's first object of compassion.
4. Abandoning the Mahayana teachings by saying that some parts of the teachings are not Buddha's teachings and promoting one's own fabricated doctrine. Believing that worldly virtue is more valuable than cultivating bodhicitta.
5. Taking back offerings given to Triple Gem and using for own worldly purpose.
6. Criticising any of the 3 traditions of Buddhism. Although Mahayana aspires beyond liberation, it is for larger purpose of enlightenment without denying the value of practices of liberation.
7. Harming an ordained person – physically, mentally, verbally – causing them give up

their robes.

8. Committing any of the 5 heinous crimes (killing mother, father, Arhat, causing schism within Sangha, wound a Buddha).
9. Cultivating and holding wrong view.
10. Destroying towns, country by fire, pollution, etc...any place inhabited by others
11. Teaching emptiness to those who are untrained. Must explain clearly and not use wrong, broad statements like all things are non-existent. Ensure that the listeners are ready to listen.
12. Discouraging those who are practising Mahayana teaching and encourage them to only train in self-liberation.
13. Encouraging others to abandon their pratimoksha (lay and ordination vows) vows. Discouraging people from practising Bodhisattva vows, tantric vows.



14. Causing others to hold incorrect views that you might hold of Hinayana practice.
15. Declaring false realisations of emptiness.
16. Accepting gifts that have been stolen from Triple Gem.
17. Taking materials from (thereby causing distractions to) the practitioner of the calm abiding and giving them to someone else, as it might cause that practitioner to be distracted.
18. Abandoning bodhicitta.

**46 secondary Bodhisattva vows** – these relate to the practices of the 6 Perfections (generosity, morality, patience, joyous perseverance, concentration and wisdom)

**4 conditions must be present to completely break a vow**

1. Failure to regard the action as wrong
2. Failure to resolve not to repeat the transgression of the vow
3. Rejoicing for having done the action
4. Having no shame or consideration for others.

**In Tantra**, given that the goal is the elimination of defilements and the attainment of enlightenment, the practitioner commits to the pledges of the 5 Dhyani Buddhas (which represent the purified aggregates) and the pledges of the 5 Dhyani Buddha families in brief, are:

1. Pledges in relation to Buddha Vairochana = 6 pledges – the first is to train in the 3 types of morality; taking refuge in each of the Triple Gem. The 3 types of morality are

- (i) refraining from negativities of body, speech and mind (as per the individual liberation vows);
- (ii) the morality of accomplishing virtue and performing continuous virtuous actions;
- (iii) the morality of working for the benefit of sentient beings. There are 11 ways to help sentient beings. Out of these 11, two refer to miraculous powers and having clairvoyance. Apart from these 2, ordinary beings can perform all the other 9.

2. Pledges in relation to Buddha Akshobya  
= 4 pledges - Those in relation to vajra mind, vajra speech, mudra commitment and commitment of vajra master. When one receives HYT initiations, it is important

to have the vajra and bell as the samaya implements. In terms of their nature, the vajra and bell symbolise the unified state of great bliss and emptiness of the Buddha

The vajra mind pledge means to remind oneself of the indivisible bliss and emptiness, arising from the practice of bodhicitta and wisdom realising emptiness.

The vajra speech pledge is represented by the definitive bell which symbolises the wisdom realising emptiness. Seeing the bell should remind us of the view of emptiness, especially reminding us that dependent-arising and emptiness are non-contradictory and compliment each other.

Mudra commitment or commitment of the

seal – this requires one to meditate on the oneness of self and deity; the inseparability of self and the deity. The reason for practising in this manner of inseparability from the deity is for our minds to overcome ordinary appearance.

Vajra master commitment: This means seeing that the master is the source of all common and uncommon attainments.

### 3. Pledges in relation to Buddha Ratnasambhava

– 4 pledges: Generosity - 4 types –

- (i) Generosity of material things e.g. food, clothing etc. Making offerings can be in relation to holy beings and giving charity to those in need.

- (ii) Generosity of giving protection from fear e.g. helping anyone in danger and this includes removing fear or troubles experienced by others.
- (iii) Generosity of giving Dharma – out of pure motivation, giving even one verse of Dharma qualifies as generosity of giving Dharma. Helping to build stupas, statues, holy images, sponsoring teaching events are all considered as generosity of Dharma. Whenever one engages in generosity with pure motivation, that single act of generosity contains all the forms of generosity. With regards to generosity in Mahayana practice, it is the attitude accompanying the deed that holds the greatest significance.
- (iv) Giving loving kindness to all beings.

#### 4. Pledges in relation to Buddha Amitabha –

training in the outer tantra, secret tantra and the 3 Vehicles.

The external tantra includes Action and Performance tantras.

The secret tantra includes the Yoga Tantra and Highest Yoga Tantra. Within the first 2 classes of tantra, especially Action Tantra, the emphasis is on the need to observe external behaviour like cleanliness and so on. For the other two, emphasis is on the inner practice.

The 3 Vehicles refers to the Hearer, Solitary Realiser and Bodhisattva paths. Since the practice here is HYT, the reason for much emphasis on the need to observe the vows of the lower classes of tantra and the training into the 3 Vehicles is to show that although one is doing HYT, one needs to have respect

of all the practices of the lower classes as well and not look down on them. The mental objectives of each vehicle might be different but the trainings are important as one is trying to benefit all beings. To show that one has to learn and respect all the trainings.

#### 5. Pledges in relation to Buddha Amogasiddhi:

There are 2 commitments:

- (i) To follow the pledges of all the other Buddhas and
- (ii) To make offerings internal (mentally transformed offerings of 5 meats and 5 nectars), external (outer objects), secret (offering consorts to the deity guru) and suchness offerings (remembering voidness), as much as possible.



## Restoration of vows

If due to lack of mindfulness or laziness, one transgresses vows, in order to restore them, one can:

- Re-take the Initiation from the same master
- Do self initiation practice (provided one has done the necessary HYT retreat complete with fire puja)
- If the master is still alive, confess in person to the master and obtain guidance and clarification on what sort of purification needs to be done and carry out the advice;
- If master alive but not accessible, one

can confess before the representative of the master (the Resident Teacher of the master's centre or the master's attendant) or a person who has close Dharma connection with these master and whose decision would normally be consistent with the master's views, confess and seek guidance.

- If master passed away or is totally inaccessible even via representative, then confess before a holy object (which one has venerated as a holy object) given by the Guru to oneself and offer 3 prostrations, confess and pledge to upkeep the commitments and vows.
- Participate in Guru Puja with full concentration

## Questions & Answers

**Q:** Is there any sequence for taking initiations – e.g. should we take Mother Tantra initiations first or Father Tantra initiations?

**Ans:** *Firstly the purpose of Father Tantra Initiations like Guhyamsamaja and Yamantaka is to attain the Illusory Body; the purpose for taking Mother Tantra Initiations like Heruka is to attain Clear Light. However, it is not necessary to adopt any particular sequence when taking initiations. The common practice is that once one has received a Father Tantra class of initiation, one is qualified to take any Mother Tantra initiation which requires a HYT initiation. The commitments for HYT are similar e.g. 6 session guruyoga (this is to remind oneself of the Bodhisattva and Tantric vows) and one should always view one's Vajra Guru,*

*Buddha, yidam (initiation deity) as inseparable. If you forget this, even doing long sadhanas will not help you progress on the spiritual path. Best is to do sadhanas in morning. Be calm and focused and generate a sense of joy in meeting tantra and engaging in its practices. No forcing, otherwise, more “loong” (inbalance in the nervous system). Wake up early and sleep before midnight.*

**Q:** It is said that depending on the quality of one’s practice, one can become Buddha in one lifetime or 16 lifetimes but do tantric vows last beyond one lifetime?

**Ans:** *All vows do not last beyond the lifetime in which they were taken but the merits derived from taking those vows, carry on.*

**Q:** If a person can become a Buddha in 16 lifetimes through taking certain initiations and thus clearly have karmic connection to Buddhas, why is that there are some people who change faiths?

**Ans:** *Karmic interruptions do happen but imprints are not lost. The teachings on the 12 links of interdependent origination shows how interruptions to karma occur.*

**Q:** Do we need initiations from both Father and Mother Tantra categories?

**Ans:** *It is not necessary to do so. Every practice of a tantric deity contains practice for the unification of both method and wisdom practices.*

**Q:** Is it true that the only beings truly qualified to engage in tantra are Bodhisattvas. Since I

don't have bodhicitta, I've taken initiations for the purpose of planting positive karmic seed to practice tantra in the future but have not put much effort into tantra practice. Is this the right approach?

**Ans:** *It is not true that only Bodhisattvas are suited for tantra. As long as you are a Southern Universe (earth) being, you are a qualified base to practice tantra. However, one needs extraordinary inspiration to practice tantra and a firm understanding in 3 Principal Aspects of the Path because without these, one will not obtain vows fully: (i) Without renunciation towards samsara, taking vows would only be in name. There are 4 doors to breaking vows – (1) ignorance (no knowledge of vows, no Lam Rim etc), (2) disrespect to Dharma/vows/Guru/ not seeing the advantages of having vows; (3) carelessness (not bothering whether we hold*

*or do not uphold the vows); (4) forgetting the vow. With a clear understanding of Lam Rim and vows, take the initiation.*

*(ii) Cultivating bodhicitta is fundamental to taking initiations – there is no point in taking initiations nor will you actually receive the initiation unless one has bodhicitta motivation to take the initiation to attain enlightenment to benefit not only self but all sentient beings.*

*(iii) One requires an understanding on the wisdom realising emptiness. Otherwise, how could we do self generation properly? We cannot simply think of ourselves as sitting there as a solid person and then without any meditation on emptiness, suddenly we become Yamantaka. Without emptiness understanding, it will not be possible to carry out the tantra practices correctly.*

**Q:** Usually we are able to read and learn about the vows before taking them – refuge vows, 5 and 8 vows, bodhisattva vows. But when it comes to Tantric vows which are given only in Highest Yoga Tantra category of initiations, we can only learn about the vows after we receive the initiation – why so?

**Ans:** *Tantric vows are intensive and strict. They confer heavier blessing, are very precious, thus not simply revealed. For those without enough merit, when you hear the tantric vows, you might even misinterpret them and misuse the vows. Or one might not have strong enough faith to digest the teachings on those vows. Hence, at the outset, a firm conviction and commitment to undertaking any vows for the sake of liberating all living beings is needed. Lay vows and bodhisattva vows are lighter and are more easily understood and require less mind transformation.*



**Q:** 6 session Guruyoga commentary – when can we read Commentaries on HYT practices?

**Ans:** *One can read Commentaries only after receiving the Commentary from a lama.*

**Q:** There are 4 categories or classes of tantra: Could Geshela please explain why only the 1st category (Kriya/Action Tantra) and the last category (Highest Yoga Tantra) are most only commonly given?

**Ans:** *It is possibly because Kriya Tantra is the simplest of all categories to practice and thus suitable for beginner to Tantra; as for HYT initiations, this is important because HYT practices (generation and completion stage practices) are needed to attain enlightenment.*

**Q:** I have some fear of taking tantric vows of HYT, how can I change my view?

**Ans:** *The feeling to have when taking an Initiation is one of great joy, premised on one's understanding of the common/Sutra Path. Of course, tantric vows given during HYT initiations are stricter than Bodhisattva vows. Dharma is rare and tantra is even more rare. Meeting qualified masters with realisations to confer HYT initiations are even more rare. No point participating in HYT for its ceremonial aspects.*

*However, if the fear experienced is great, perhaps it is a sign that it would be better for the person to train more in the common path/Sutra path before taking the initiation.*

**Q:** What if one accidentally reads a Commentary before receiving the Commentary from a qualified master?

**Ans:** *In order to read the Commentary on the Guru Puja for example, requires one to have received a HYT initiation. Yet in the monastery, even young monks read it, though they cannot really understand it. However, in-depth study on tantric vows require HYT initiation.*

**Q:** what is difference between self generation and self-initiation

**Ans:** *Self generation means visualising oneself as deity; self initiation is doing the complete self-initiation practice, with oneself as initiation leader.*

**Q:** We were told that even if we don't hear all instructions during an initiation, we can think that whatever the lama asks us to do, we regard ourselves as having done - how effective is that?

**Ans:** *Motivating that way is fine but there is no guarantee that one will receive the initiation fully. If one is mentally blur during the initiation, it is doubtful whether one has received the initiation or not. It is best to pay attention and follow the instructions. Then even if there may be some lapses in hearing all the instructions, if one has strong conviction that one has received the initiation, then one would indeed have received it.*

**Q:** If one has a busy life, should one take on more initiations?

**Ans:** *For me and as advised by the past Kadampa masters, it is advisable to focus on a single deity because our wisdom and effort may not be able to manage the practices of many deities. To accomplish the practice of one deity, is to accomplish the practice of all deities.*

**Q:** What is purpose of visualing the Buddha's body and the Buddha's mandala?

*Ans: Visualising the Buddha deity is to practice the 3 bodies of the Buddha's form + qualities. Visualising the Mandala is to visualise the celestial mansion as that is one's future abode. It is taking the resultant state into the present causal stage of practice. However, the main point is that every mandala has the 5 Dhyani Buddhas, which represent one's purified aggregates. One should reflect on the qualities of each of these Buddhas and the practices associated with them to achieve purity.*

**Q:** Vajrasattva and Bendasattva - which is correct?

*Ans: They are same – Bendza is Sanskrit, other is Tibetan.*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The sponsor of this book wishes to remain anonymous but dedicates it to the spread of the holy Buddhadharma in its totality – sutra & tantra – under the guidance of perfectly qualified Mahayana masters. May all true practitioners perfect the Path, liberate all sentient beings and thereby fulfil the prayers of our holy Gurus, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

## HOW TO TREAT DHARMA BOOKS

Dharma books contain the teachings of the Buddha. They have the power to protect against lower rebirth and to point the way to liberation.

Therefore, they should be treated with respect – kept off the floor and places where people sit or walk and should not be stepped over. They should be covered or protected for transporting and kept in a high, clean place separated from other mundane materials. Other objects, including statues and stupas, should not be placed on top of dharma books and materials. Licking the fingers to turn pages is considered negative and will create negative karma.

If it is necessary to dispose of written dharma

materials, they should be burned rather than thrown in the trash.

When offering dharma texts to the fire, first recite the mantra OM AH HUNG, then visualize the letters of the texts to be burned absorbing into the syllable AH and the AH absorbing into you, transmitting their wisdom to your mind stream. After that, as you continue to recite OM AH HUNG, you can offer the texts to the fire.

Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche has specifically advised that photos or images of holy beings, deities and other holy objects should not be burned and instead placed with respect in stupas or other high clean places so that they do not end up on the ground.





### ***Geshe Tenzin Zopa***

Geshe Tenzin Zopa holds a doctorate in Buddhist Philosophy from Sera Jey Monastic University in South India and is a master in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. He is currently the Resident Teacher at Losang Dragpa Buddhist Society, Malaysia.

Geshe Tenzin Zopa has a contemporary style of teaching which he combines with the ancient wisdom derived from his years of philosophical studies and debate and is the face of a dynamic and socially engaged Buddhism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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