

Remarks on The Essence of Buddhist Tantra

A Teaching by His Holiness the Sakya Trizin

In His infinite compassion, wisdom and power, the Lord Sakyamuni Buddha gave innumerable teachings aimed at helping countless beings with their infinitely diverse dispositions. These teachings can be classified according to two approaches: the Sravakayana, and the Mahayana. The former is concerned with individual salvation, while the latter stresses the universal ideal of the Bodhisattva, a being intent on attaining enlightenment for the sake of all beings and who has vowed to remain in samsara until liberation is won for all beings.

Mahayana itself may be further divided into the Paramitayana - or Perfection Vehicle - also known as Cause Vehicle, according to which the Bodhisattva cultivates moral perfection as a cause for future Buddhahood; and the Mantrayana - or Mantra Vehicle - also known as Result Vehicle, whereby one realises wisdom or gnosis through following certain practices. Whilst both vehicles were practised widely in Tibet, Mantrayana and its four classes of *Tantra - Krya, Carya, Yoga and Anuttarayoga* - were especially prized. They were seen as a precious jewel, whose purity was preserved through the development of a cohesive monastic tradition, isolated from the external world.

The word 'tantra' is seldom used in Tibetan Buddhism, and usually refers to the body of tantric



scriptures. The terms 'Mantrayana' or 'Vajrayana' are more commonly used in reference to a doctrinal system. The term 'Vajrayana' refers to the spiritual path that is immutable, the Diamond Vehicle that leads to the realisation of the enlightenment mind, and that is ever present although currently obscured by our ignorance (*avidya*).

Etymologically, the word '*tantra*' may be understood as a continuum, a thread or lineage that gives continuity to the teachings, much as a genetic code determines the form insects, birds, and all sentient creatures take at birth, so that *tantra*, in the Buddhist sense, may be understood as that 'genetic' code that links our Buddha nature through successive incarnations until enlightenment is attained. And so a Vajrayana initiation in one lifetime may result in a rebirth as a Buddhist or as one who embarks on the Bodhisattva path.

The Tantras are sacred texts that have no temporal beginning. They don't originate in the human realm. Buddhist and Hindu Tantras share many similarities but also have many differences. The Tantras propounded by Sakyamuni Buddha, such as the Hevajra Tantra, the Kalachakra Tantra and the Guyasamaja Tantra, find their origin in His very words as revealed to Him by Adi-Buddha Vajradhara. It is through the practice of these Tantras that the Buddha attained enlightenment.

Although tantrism is a method common to both Hinduism and Buddhism, there are many differences in substance and detail between the two. The complementary character of Buddhist and Hindu Tantras developed as alternative ways to seek release from the bondage of samsara. There is some speculation that Tantrism goes back to the pre-Aryan era, to the earliest known phase of Indian civilisation. Scholars believe that it originated in Northwest India, and that it spread through the Himalayan foothills to the entire Indian subcontinent. Many of the tantric deities began as local gods and goddesses that were incorporated into the tantric system. The system was widely practised by both religions in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. and reached its peak in India in the 10th and 11th centuries. According to some Tibetan and Indian scholars, several of the eighty-four Buddhist Mahasiddhas were actually Hindu

Mahasiddhas. A case in hand would be the great Buddhist Mahasiddha Luipa, whom some sources quote as being the Hindu Mahasiddha Matsijendra. These 'perfected ones' were collectively known in Indian and Tibetan histories as the eighty-four Siddhas. It is to their biographies that we must turn if we are to understand the oral transmission of the earliest Tantras. Tantra is a method, a technique. Its earliest practitioners were not interested in labels, any more that a nuclear physicist cares about his nationality when he compares notes with a foreign colleague. They were concerned with method and debated on the efficacy of their respective techniques. Many Hindu practitioners were eventually persuaded to adopt the Mahayana view.

There were many schools of Hindu tantrism in ancient India, wherein philosophical views differed widely, ranging all the way from nihilism to materialism. Here, however, the word '*tantra*' may be understood in the Hindu sense of 'interwovenness', much as the threads of a fabric are metaphors for the complementary union of male and female principles of cosmic passivity and power.

We are not well-versed in Hindu tantrism and can only speak with authority about our own tradition. Buddhist and Hindu tantras share a similar technology in which there is an orderly structure that is in keeping with the esoteric connective tissue of macrocosm and microcosm. But although they share a methodology, Hindu and Buddhist tantras differ radically in their philosophies.

In Hindu tantra, the focus is placed on the female *Sakti* as the spiritual basis of our world, which is a manifestation of her, and liberation means casting off the limitations set by human birth. The Self's ultimate union with God or Brahman may be obtained during one's mortal life by means of the body, when the internal *Sakti* reaches union with the internal Siva. Liberation arises from the merging of

the inner universal principle (*atman*) with the external principle (*brahman*). The identity of the Self or the individual soul (*jiva*) with the absolute is a tenet of Vedic and Hindu belief. Brahman is considered to be a self-existent entity, an eternal unchanging essence of reality.

On the other hand, we find that in the Buddhist tantras, the consort is referred to as '*prajna*': insight or wisdom. The terms '*yogini*' (*female yogic practitioner*), '*vidya*' (*knowledge*), '*mudra*' (*seal*) or '*devi*' (*goddess*) refer to the female principle. The Goddess as the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajnaparamita*) appears as the final truth of the void (*sunyata*). Omniscient knowledge has compassion (*karuna*) as its root; it has the enlightenment mind as its nature; it has the vow of the Bodhisattva as its motivation and it contains the means for the result. These coefficients of wisdom and compassion are identified with the perfections of the Bodhisattva and the intermingling of nirvana and samsara, so that when this wisdom is combined with the means, it no longer is passive but appears in its fully active form.

As the Lord Buddha Sakyamuni was a Ksatriya, some of the rituals of the Buddhist tantras may be traced back to the old Vedic rituals, such as the fire ritual, and to the *Upanisads*. But again, while the practices may be similar in form, the philosophy behind each one varies radically.

Buddhists see reality as having no ultimate self-existence and no true self-nature. The three-fold state of the *Buddhakaya* is associated with the spiritual and external spheres of the cosmological map and with certain places in the human body. At the vertical body of the mandala, mind is preeminent among the five *skandhas*, while the other four are visualised at the cardinal compass points. We meditate on the heavenly and earthly divinities within the body, but the most important thing is that we take the generation of the enlightenment mind as the very foundation of our

practice. In all the Mahayana schools, enlightenment mind is the root cause for the spiritual path. The human body is not merely a miniature version of the supernal, but it contains the nature of the *Dharmakaya*, *Sambhogakaya* and the *Nirmanakaya* as the three-fold bodies of our enlightened Buddha nature. Without the generation of enlightenment thought, no result can arise. These are some of the essential differences between the Buddhist and Hindu views.

In the Buddhist tantras, the union of *prajna* and *karuna*, insight and compassion, produces the fullness of cosmic awareness through the meeting of opposites. It is central to the notion of sacred and profane when these are viewed in the mirror of the clear light of mind itself. The mind has many facets. Its foundation is what we call '*künshi*' or all-base consciousness (*alaya*). This is the basis upon which both samsara and nirvana are built. It is the clear aspect of mind itself, that which does not focus on other things but rests in perception of itself, as it has done from beginningless time and will do until enlightenment is reached.

Mahayanists believe that we should enter neither samsara nor nirvana, but that we should follow the middle path. Through the power of our wisdom we do not remain in samsara, and through the power of our compassion we do not remain in nirvana. When we attain enlightenment, which we call non-abiding nirvana, we are free from suffering but we remain in samsara out of compassion for beings who are trapped in it, and we help them.

In Buddhist metaphysics, the philosophical view of voidness, or *sunyata*, is paramount to achieving liberation. If we realise that reality has no ultimate self-existence and that all appearances arise from the mind, we attain the view of the non-duality of samsara and nirvana. We clearly see that samsara is nirvana, we enter in direct contact with our Buddha

nature, and enlightenment becomes within reach in this very lifetime.

Vajrayana is a method. Its primary intention and its final goal are the same as those of the Mahayana, but it provides a methodology of far greater efficacy in that it calls for us to use both our mind and body in its practice. It is the most sophisticated technology available for attaining liberation. It is a bit like travelling by airplane rather than by train. And just as an airplane needs many conditions in order to fly, such as fuel, air, a reliable engine, an efficient design and so forth, when we seek realisation through Vajrayana we need to assiduously exert ourselves to fill all the necessary requisites for the attainment of the result.

Preeminent among these requisites is our personal, daily meditation on the two stages of creation and completion, the visualisation of the mandala and the deity. The recitation of mantras, the practice of physical yogas such as the breathing yoga, the yoga of inner heat, the dream yoga and meditative postures, as well as the nurturing of the enlightenment mind and the cultivation of ethical conduct, are also crucial factors.

After we receive a Vajrayana initiation, there are many vows that we need to keep in addition to the monastic Pratimoksa vows and the Mahayana vows. There are also Tantric vows, without which no practice can be effective. It is much like a farmer looking after his crops. If he is to have the right conditions for a good harvest, he must protect his crop from adverse elements such as hailstorms or floods; he must ensure that the soil is properly fertilised, he must provide it with sufficient sunlight and water, and so forth.

In the same way, when we seek spiritual results, we need to set the right conditions for these to arise. If we practise correctly, then the attainment of the view of the non-differentiation of samsara and

nirvana will naturally arise, and with it the mundane and supramundane *siddhis* that enable us to help other beings.

The tantric method used in Tibet was very sophisticated and carefully systemised so that sincere and able practitioners were guaranteed results, provided they had the enlightenment mind as their root motivation.

As was mentioned earlier, generation of the enlightenment mind is central to both Mahayanist and Vajrayanist practice. Their three foundations are love, compassion and the generation of enlightenment mind, or *bodhicitta*. All practice must arise from selflessness.

Love means that we want all beings in all realms of existence to be happy, compassion is the wish that sentient beings should depart from suffering, and the generation of the enlightenment mind is the pursuit of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Without love and compassion, the enlightenment mind will not arise; and without the enlightenment mind, liberation cannot be attained. If the enlightenment mind is like a seed that we plant, love and compassion are like the water that we pour on it while it grows to fruition.

Chandrakirti wrote in the *Madhyamikavatara* that the *Sravakas* and *Pratyekhabuddhas* are born of the Buddha, while the Buddha is born of the Bodhisattva, and the Bodhisattva is born of love and compassion - especially from compassion. And so he paid special homage to compassion, without which the root cause of enlightenment cannot arise. This then, is why we meditate on some father and mother tantras wherein the deities are in union, the union of wisdom and compassion.

During the period of Buddhism's greatest flowering in ancient India, there was a vast tantric tradition related to the practice of the mandala. The term 'mantra' may be defined as a method for

protecting the mind against conceptualisation or concepts that possess certain marks or characteristics. The efficacy of Vajrayana rests upon many factors, the most important one of which is the line of direct transmission of initiation or *abhiseka* which has been unbroken since the Lord Sakyamuni Buddha set into motion the Wheel of Dharma. The term 'mandala' may be briefly defined as a method on the basis of which one can reach and maintain the spontaneous co-emergent wisdom of great bliss that is always present within the mind. In order to enter into the practice of the mandala, one must receive an initiation, a consecration.

Transmission is particularly important in Vajrayana as the lama is part of a lineage of teachers who have received direct transmission originating from the Adi-Buddha Vajradhara, the Buddha under whom all the five Buddha families can be subsumed. This direct unbroken blessing must be received before the special ripening can occur. It is said in the tantras that, if we wish to receive a transmission, we need to find the Guru with whom we have a special karmic connection, and who has all the qualifications to teach the Tantras.

When we find this Guru, we should receive transmissions and explanations from him. The Guru is seen as a priest who confers upon us initiation into the mysteries of religion. The efficacy of initiation is that it purifies appearances relating to the defilements that hinder the essential nature of great bliss that resides in the mind. It has the capacity for that awakening that makes one a fitting vessel for contemplating the clear light. The continuity of the Vajrayana initiation has been maintained through the unbroken transmission that serves to mature the practitioner and lead him to liberation.

We must receive the teaching on the five Buddha families in the form of a *Wang-kur* (*empowerment*), the transmission or permission to practise Tantra.

After receiving the transmission, we must fulfill its obligations and learn to see ourselves very clearly as the result. Then, because of the special connection between cause and result, the result will naturally arise. A major empowerment is never given to a person who does not have the capacity for generating the enlightenment mind.

If in Mahayana, one must not practise without a teacher, this is all the more true of Vajrayana. In this day and age, most teachings have been put to writing but nevertheless, they must always be taught orally. One cannot obtain any result by merely studying a text. In Vajrayana, it is necessary to receive the *Wang-kur*, which is the door to Tantra, and without which one cannot undertake its practice. In many cases, a clear sign appears when we find the Guru with whom we have a karmic link. The moment the great Sakya teacher Tsarchen heard of the Sakya teacher Doringpa, he felt a compelling urge to meet him there and then. Vajrayogini, the female deity, appeared to him and gave him a book saying "This book was sent to you by Doringpa". Tsarchen then asked around to find out where Doringpa was and made the effort to meet him. When he had received the consecration and instructions from him, he achieved far greater results than he had ever before. Generally speaking, there is an unmistakable sign that indicates when we have found our Guru.

Mahayana is referred to as the cause *yana*, because within it we strive to practise moral conduct in order to create the right causes for liberation. Vajrayana is called the result *yana* because from the beginning we visualise ourselves as the Buddha in one form or another. By practising visualisation in this way, the immense qualities of the Buddha will automatically arise in our being. Our entire organism actually is the pure Buddha and always has been, but as we are wrapped in illusion, we are not able to see it. This is not an arbitrary conclusion

but rather, we have the example of countless others who have purified their obscurations and achieved enlightenment using these methods.

There are many tendencies or predispositions that need to be transformed as they have no base in the *alaya* - or base consciousness- consequently they can be the cause of much suffering. We can take as an example sexual energies; as such, these are conventionally regarded as hindrances to the spiritual path, but if correctly used, they can help us immensely. In fact there is no such thing as impurity. Impurities appear because we have not realised the true nature of our minds and are still thinking in terms of subject and object.

There is an infinite number of beings of all types, but they can be subsumed into five categories, and although these five can be included in a single one, the teachings of the five different types are an important visualisation to begin with. We imagine a mandala that contains the five *Dhyani* Buddhas, all of whom attained enlightenment as Buddha Sakyamuni did, in one eon or another. Four of them are placed at the four cardinal points and one is placed at the centre of the mandala. The Buddha at the centre is dark blue and is called Aksobhya, the 'Unmoving One'. In the east is the white Buddha Vairocana, the 'One Who Creates Appearances'. In the south is yellow Ratnasambhava, the 'One Who has the Nature of a Gem', and in the west is red Amithaba which means 'Limitless Light'. In the north is green Amoghasiddhi, the 'One Who is Skilled in Accomplishing All Possible Acts'. They are all in the form of Buddha Sakyamuni, except that they have different hand gestures. Aksobhya touches the earth in the *Bhumispara* mudra, while Vairocana's hands are in the gesture of teaching; Ratnasambhava displays the gesture of giving, Amithaba the gesture of meditation and Amoghasiddhi holds up his right hand to show the crossed Vajra on his palm, the gesture of

fearlessness.

These five deities and their colours are related to the five most common defilements that we are afflicted with as a result of the obscurations of our human condition: blue Aksobhya is related to anger, white Vairocana to ignorance, yellow Ratnasambhava to pride and miserliness, red Amithaba to desire and green Amoghasiddhi to envy. There are also marks of the five Buddha races on the bodies of beings. Persons who are often angry will have a mark similar to a Vajra on their body, and they can clearly be recognised as belonging to the Vajra family of Akshobhya. Since the Buddha Akshobhya represents the complete transformation of anger, these persons will succeed with particular ease and swiftness in purifying their defilements if they practise the path related to Akshobhya. We never regard any particular defilement such as anger or desire as something to be repressed, but rather we see the energies tied up in the defilements as material to be purified and transformed into the five Buddhas, each of whom is the embodiment of a particular aspect of wisdom. This is another reason why we call Vajrayana the result yana.

There are limitless beings with different tastes and predispositions and so, in order to suit beings of different temperaments, the transcendental wisdom of the Buddha has taken different forms. People with strong desire meditate on deities in a passionate form, embracing consorts surrounded by many goddesses; for people with much hatred, there are meditations on deities in very wrathful forms; those with much ignorance can meditate on very elaborate deities with many jewels and ornaments, but actually these are different aspects of the same transcendental wisdom. Transcendental wisdom is divine wisdom, the power and energy of the Buddha.

Many of the tantras were given by Lord Buddha Sakyamuni, including the Hevajra Tantra, upon

which the main Sakya practice of Lamdre is founded. This is an extensive teaching incorporating all the practices of Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. In our tradition, it was transmitted directly by Hevajra's consort Nairatmya to Virupa, the great Indian Mahasiddha and sage from Nalanda, and was later brought to Tibet by the translator Drogmi, who lived between 978 and 1072 CE.

The Lam Dre Lob She or 'Path as Result', is a vast teaching based on the empowerment and practice of the Hevajra Tantra. It includes the philosophy of Tantra as well as all of the tantric practices such as the yoga of inner heat, the yoga of dreams, breathing practices and so forth. Many other traditions of tantra practised by the Mahasiddhas and Pandits of ancient India have specific transmissions that were introduced into Tibet by the translators and have been upheld to the present day. One such transmission is the Vajramala, or Vajra Rosary, which came from the great Indian master Avayakara Gupta, who was graced by a vision of the deity Vajrayogini on three occasions. Avayakara Gupta was a great *pandit* endowed with the highest capabilities. He had seen the nature of reality, he had received direct inspiration from the deity, and he was immensely learned. It is on the basis of these criteria that he composed the collection of scriptures known as the Vajramala.

Avalokiteshvara conferred many, outer, inner and secret teachings upon him, based on which Avayakara Gupta composed treatises relating to nearly two hundred different mandalas. These have come down to us to the present day without any break in their transmission.

There are also many special esoteric teachings, such as those of Naropa, Vajrayogini and the eleven yogas, those of Mahakala, and especially those of Vajrakilaya, which our family still upholds from the old Nyingmapa tradition; Sarvavidya, which is used for the dying and the dead, Vajrabharava,

the wrathful form of Manjusri from the 'Golden Teachings' and many others. But most of the basic Sakya teachings from the preparation stage to the attainment of enlightenment are included in the Lam Dre Lob She. Other transmissions including the collections of Avayakara Gupta and Mindra Yogin can be found in the *rGyud Sde Kun bTus*, or 'Collection of Tantras' which, in addition to those already mentioned, includes collections from other traditions. As the Tantras were in danger of being lost, the publication of this compendium was initiated in the nineteenth century by Jamyang Loter Wangpo. The latter supervised the preparation of thirty-two volumes, which were the result of centuries of meticulous collecting by encyclopedists. He himself was considered to be an emanation of Vajrapani, the Lord of Secrets who held and protected the teachings of Sakyamuni, and is said to have been the one who gathered and preserved essential teachings in this degenerate age. Jamyang Loter Wangpo's qualities and learning were inconceivably vast.

Why do we find liberation through the practice of Vajrayana?

The motivation with which Lord Buddha taught us to pursue the Bodhisattva ideal is the cause that actually takes us to liberation, and the continuity of its blessing has never been interrupted since the Adi-Buddha Vajradhara until the present day. A succession of teachers have scrupulously maintained the purity of the Lord Buddha's essential teaching on the non-differentiation of samsara and nirvana and have made available to others an immense variety of methods to help beings with different personalities to gain realisation. As they were themselves intent on enlightenment, their blessings have resulted in a rain of wisdom for those who pursue the Bodhisattva ideal.