

Teachings on Tantric Practice



By Khenpo Tsultrim Tenzin

Edited by Khenmo Trinlay

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Introductory Remarks about Buddhism

Before discussing deity practice, I will say a few things about the history and philosophy of Buddhism. The historical buddha, Buddha Shakyamuni, was born as a prince in India. When looking at the Buddhist tradition, it is important to consider why Prince Siddhartha became a homeless renunciant and how he became a buddha. Before renouncing his kingdom, Prince Siddhartha was very wealthy and powerful. He was the prince of a large kingdom and had access to more material possessions than he could ever use. The only thing Siddhartha lacked was his mother, who passed away one week after he was born.

One day, he snuck out of the palatial grounds where he lived and discovered that life outside the palace walls was much different than life inside. Outside the gates he saw the real world, samsara. Prince Siddhartha's father had tried his best to make his son happy by hiding this reality from him. When Prince Siddhartha walked outside the palace, he saw sickness, old age, and death. He also saw a person who appeared to be very peaceful. The prince asked his attendant whether everyone would have to deal with sickness, old age, and death. His attendant told him the truth, that everyone would eventually face sickness, old age, and death. From that moment on, Prince Siddhartha made up his mind that he would find a way to be free from this suffering. He was so strongly moved by the suffering outside his palace that he renounced his princely status and his kingdom, and became a wandering ascetic in order to search for a way to release himself from this suffering. Through his subsequent training and practice, he became enlightened.

What is the purpose of becoming enlightened? The purpose of becoming enlightened is to eradicate suffering. The cause of suffering is confusion and delusion. These delusions lead to nonvirtuous action, which in turn results in many different types of suffering. Once a person removes the subtlest of these delusions, he becomes fully awakened to the ultimate state of reality, and is known as a buddha. The Buddha discovered how to eradicate his delusions and suffering, and after he became enlightened, he taught others to do the same.

At the core of the Buddha's teachings are the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. By way of introducing these two truths, the Buddha explained the causes of suffering and the causes of happiness. According to him, everything is based on the law of cause and effect. If you undertake any positive actions, the result will be happiness. If you undertake any negative actions, you will find suffering. We do not say that the Buddha created these ideas or arbitrarily decided which actions are positive and which are negative. Instead, the Buddha simply discovered and explained the laws of reality.

According to the Buddha, 84,000 types of coarse delusion can be identified. Each being is subject to 84,000 afflicting emotions: 21,000 attachments, 21,000 aversions, 21,000 ignorances, and 21,000 more subtle poisons. Thus, the Buddha taught 84,000 heaps of Dharma teachings as direct antidotes to these coarse delusions. By applying the antidotes, we can eventually eradicate this gross level of delusion.

His teachings can be placed into three categories or “baskets”:

the Sutra, Vinaya, and Abhidharma, which respectively are the antidotes for the poisons. The 21,000 vinaya teachings are antidotes for the 21,000 attachments; the 21,000 sutra teachings counteract the 21,000 varieties of aversion; the 21,000 abhidharma teachings oppose the 21,000 types of ignorance. The fourth basket, as explained by Pema Karpo, refers to the tantric teachings, which are the antidotes for the more subtle poisons. So now the question is, how does one person put all 84,000 teachings into practice?

To ensure that our practice is complete, the Buddha taught that the path to buddhahood can be subsumed under three categories of training: morality (addressed in the vinaya teachings), meditation (addressed in the sutra teachings), and wisdom (addressed in the abhidharma teachings). For example, the Noble Eightfold Path is a progression of practices taught by the Buddha and more emphasized in non-Mahayana Buddhism. The eight stages are: right view, right thought, right speech, right effort, right livelihood, right mindfulness, right concentration, and right action. These can be explained in terms of the three trainings. The training in morality is comprised of right speech, livelihood, and action. The training in meditation, sometimes called mind training or samadhi, includes right mindfulness and concentration. The training in wisdom is right view and thought. Right effort supports all the trainings.

For Mahayana practitioners, a similar progression of practices is known as the Six Perfections or Six Paramitas. The great Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna said that in order to achieve the ultimate realization of the nature of all phenomena, one must first train in practices such as the Six Perfections. The six are: generosity, moral ethics, patience, perseverance, meditative concentration or *samadhi*, and wisdom. The training in morality encompasses generosity, moral ethics, and patience. The training in meditation is the practice of samadhi. The training in wisdom is the wisdom paramita, while perseverance supports all three trainings. However you categorize them, these practices will eventually lead you to the realization of the ultimate nature of reality. Without them, you would have no base from which to understand the higher teachings. In *Engaging in the Conduct of Bodhisattvas*, Shantideva says that training in the first five perfections is the direct cause for the arising of the wisdom realizing emptiness. Without them, you cannot attain the wisdom that realizes emptiness.

The Buddha also summarized his teachings with four seals:

- * All composite phenomena are impermanent.
- * All contaminated phenomena are unsatisfactory.
- * All phenomena are empty and devoid of self-existence.
- * Nirvana is true peace.

Many great Tibetan masters based teachings on this arrangement of the Dharma. For example, Lord Gampopa taught the *Four Dharmas of Gampopa*, the great Sakyapa Sachen taught *Parting from the Four Attachments*, and Je Tsong Khapa taught the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*. We will look briefly at the first of these, the *Four Dharmas of Gampopa*.

1. May my mind follow the Dharma.

In this first statement, Gampopa stresses the importance of fully turning the mind toward Dharma practice. When we are practicing Dharma, the mind should be focused on the Buddha-dharma. Lord Jigten Sumgön gave a slightly more nuanced explanation of this line by restating it as *AMay my Dharma follow the Dharma.* When we are practicing the Dharma, we need to be sure that our practice is actually in accord with the real Dharma. If our practice is motivated by wanting to make this life more pleasant or by a desire for wealth, fame, or power, then our practice has become samsaric. It is possible to begin with the right motivation but inadvertently stray from this motivation. So even though we have fooled ourselves with the appearance of Dharma practice, in reality it is something else. Our practice should be for a higher purpose than gaining material benefits for this life, or even for the next one. Our Dharma practice must be aimed at the attainment of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Only then is *our* Dharma following *the* Dharma. As long as you remain attached to the pleasures of samsara, you are following the path of samsara.

We can also understand this first statement as a teaching about impermanence. All compounded phenomena, all things, are by nature in constant flux. This is reality; this is the Dharma. Thus, we should train our minds so that they tend toward this reality.

2. May the Dharma turn into the path.

Of course, it is not enough to just turn toward the Dharma. We need to put our understanding of the Dharma into action by progressing on the path. Gampopa said that the reason he explained his "Four Dharmas" in such great detail is that he was trying to help his followers become genuine practitioners. As explained earlier, our practice cannot be aimed at merely achieving the goals of this lifetime. We should turn our attention beyond petty goals toward the path to complete enlightenment.

The great Sachen said if you are attached to samsara, or worldly pleasure, you lack true renunciation and are not a Dharma practitioner. The Kadampa master, Drom Tonpa, also emphasized renunciation, calling it the first of the Three Principal Aspects of the Path. Je Tsong Khapa has also taught that if you really want to become a Dharma practitioner, you must generate renunciation as a first step. What Gampopa, Sachen, and the other great lamas are trying to tell us is that without proper realization of renunciation, without a true mind of renunciation toward samsaric, mundane pleasures, we cannot count ourselves as true Dharma practitioners. The following story illustrates this point:

Buddha Shakyamuni's half-brother, Nanda, was very much attached to his wife. He had no intentions whatsoever to leave the home-life and practice renunciation. However, he later discovered that if he became ordained, he could be reborn in a god realm. With that motivation, Nanda decided to become ordained. Wishing to point him onto the right path, the Buddha called the other disciples together and told them, "Nanda is not like you. He has become a monk in order to gain higher rebirth, not to become enlightened. You should not associate with him in any way." Eventually, due to being shunned by the other monks, Nanda began to recognize his mistake and subsequently corrected his motivation.

Renunciation is so very important because the root cause of our endless cycling in samsara is our tendency to react with attachment or aversion. All Buddhist traditions agree on this point, as this story shows:

One time, a Chinese monk arrived at the Tibetan king's palace. The king was puzzled by the fact that the philosophical view presented by the Chinese monk was different from the one understood in Tibet. He reasoned, "If there is just one Buddha, it is impossible for more than one tradition to be true." He invited Kamalashila to come from India to debate with the Chinese monk. As it turns out, this had all been prophesied by Kamalashila's teacher, the abbot Shantarakshita, some time before. Before they met, Kamalashila wanted to test the Chinese monk's understanding, to see whether his view was based in wisdom or ignorance. If the Chinese view was based in ignorance, then there was no hope for him. From across the river, Kamalashila swung his cane in a circle over his head three times, which represented the question, "what is the cause of the three realms?" In response, the Chinese monk shook his robes two times. Kamalashila understood him to mean that the root cause of samsara is twofold, attachment and aversion, and went on to meet him.

The dangers of attachment and aversion are shown by this story that I have heard, but not seen in a text:

One time, a fire broke out at Drigung Thil monastery. Many practitioner monks were living on the mountain close to the monastery. Because of the fire, all those monks flew in the air to safety on the other side of the mountain. In the middle of his flight, one monk remembered that he had left his fire-flint behind. As a result of his attachment, he lost his concentration on flying, fell to the earth, and died.

To emphasize the pernicious nature of attachment and aversion, Jigten Sumgön said that attachment and aversion can cause even a tenth level bodhisattvas to fall into the hell realm if they fall prey to them. In order to overcome suffering, we must understand the truth of emptiness. This understanding is called wisdom. Without this wisdom that realizes emptiness, we will not achieve the ultimate goal of buddhahood despite studying the sutras and engaging in the deity yoga of secret mantra. There is even the possibility that someone who studies sutra and practices secret-mantra, but does not have an understanding of emptiness, will be reborn as a powerful negative spirit. Thus, the understanding of emptiness is crucial to one's spiritual development.

The teachings on meditation are often focused on "single-pointed" concentration. But more important than technical skill is the understanding that without proper awareness and properly focused mental resources, we cannot be considered genuine Dharma practitioners. This is because the mind will be wandering from here to there no matter what kind of practices we are engaged in. When the Buddha taught the principles of concentration, on one level he was indeed talking about samadhi. But at the

same time, he was reminding us to remain aware and alert regardless of whether the mind is in single-pointed meditation or in a post-meditation state.

After teaching about concentration, the Buddha elucidated the principles of wisdom, the wisdom that realizes emptiness—the ultimate nature of all phenomena. It is crucial to achieve the mind that understands and realizes emptiness. Even a merely intellectual understanding of this can motivate us to eradicate defilements and lead ourselves out of samsara toward total liberation. Without this wisdom that realizes emptiness, we cannot attain nirvana or liberation no matter how strong our accumulation of merit is. So this, too, is something that defines us as genuine practitioners.

3. May the path be free from confusion.

According to Gampopa, lower level practitioners—those who are practicing in the sravaka or pratyekabuddha vehicles—remain confused about the ultimate nature of reality. Therefore, in order to remove that confusion, one must climb up the ladder, so to speak, to the Mahayana practices. We must focus on generating the mind of bodhicitta; this is the second crucial principle of the path. Many great masters, Je Tsong Khapa in particular, emphasized this. The great scholar Sachen said that if you are still attached to yourself and your own well-being while practicing the Dharma, you are not a bodhisattva. If, however, the object of your practice is to help other beings, you are a bodhisattva.

4. May all confusion dawn as wisdom.

If an individual continues to grasp objects as real, continues to react with attachment and aversion, they lack a true realization of the correct view of reality. This “view” can be taught in so many different ways. Here, when we talk about view, we are talking about the ultimate nature of reality, the ultimate realization of the emptiness of all phenomena. Je Tsong Khapa stated that the third and final principal aspect of the path is this correct view of emptiness.

Many of you may have already heard this, but it is important to return to these foundational principles again and again. Nowadays, so many people are tempted to enter into the highest practices, such as deity yoga, dream yoga, the highest of the tantric practices. People act as if they believe the past masters laid down these foundation teachings because they were bored and had nothing better to do. This is not the case. These teachings and practices are the true foundation of the higher teachings and practices. Without them, a practitioner cannot expect to successfully jump to the higher teachings and practices. If they were to do so without a solid foundation, their practice would be meaningless. This is why I am emphasizing these fundamental teachings.

The Buddha was not trying to waste people’s time. He could have taught more directly about the higher teachings. But, as the past masters have explained, a practitioner who has no understanding of death and impermanence will not be able to achieve anything while practicing mahamudra. As mentioned earlier, the Buddha’s 84,000 teachings are direct antidotes to the 84,000 coarse delusions of our mental continuum. If you lack one of those antidotes, you are like a sculptor who lacks one kind of chisel. Your work will not be complete or perfect because your tool set is incomplete. Therefore,

before giving a secret mantra empowerment or teaching, His Holiness the Dalai Lama always reminds the students that without at least an elementary understanding of emptiness, there is no way one can practice secret mantra properly or receive the empowerment in the fullest way. Therefore, all teachings of the Buddha are necessary for the complete purification of all delusions.

Introduction to Vajrayana

The term “vajra” has both internal and external significance. The internal vajra is the realization or deep understanding of the words of the lama during a secret mantra empowerment. In other words, one who possesses the internal vajra of a particular secret mantra empowerment has achieved the wisdom the practice embodies.

The external vajra is physical. Vajras can be made of wood, crystal, or other types of material, and come in several different forms. They can have a varying numbers of prongs: some have 24 or 20, while others have three, five, nine, or just one. A vajra with a single prong represents the indestructible, immovable experience of dharmadhatu, the ultimate nature of all things. A vajra with three prongs represents the purified form of body, speech, and mind. A vajra that has five prongs represents the five buddha families or the five kayas. A vajra with nine prongs represents the nine vehicles or yantras. However it is expressed, the vajra is essentially a symbol of the realization of emptiness.

This meaning is based on a weapon found in the God-realm of the Thirty-three, located at the top of Mount Meru. This vajra-weapon is the only one that can overpower all others and is itself indestructible. Similarly, the realization of emptiness destroys all delusions, all the root causes of samsara. Nothing can destroy a mind that realizes emptiness. Thus, the meaning of the vajra is the mind that realizes emptiness.

In terms of Buddha Shakyamuni, it is clear that the secret mantra did occur within his teachings. While the Buddha was teaching the three turnings of the wheel publicly, he also taught certain tantras to audiences consisting of beings with the highest faculties, such as the bodhisattva Vajrapani. An example of this is the Kalachakra Tantra, which was taught at a place called Glorious Drepung in south India. There used to be a big stupa there on the site where the Buddha displayed a Chakrasamvara mandala. Although we can prove that the tantras were taught by the Buddha in India during his teaching career, the tantras were not widespread or well known to the human community in central India at that time.

There are many ways to categorize the various genres or branches of the Buddha's teachings, such as the location at which a teaching was given, the audience, the time a teaching was given, and so forth. However, the categories of tantric teachings are not as definite as those of other teachings. Nonetheless, we can mention with certainty that the majority were taught in Uddiyana, which is present day Pakistan, and the main recipient of these teachings was King Indrabhuti.

From his palace, King Indrabhuti could frequently see beings flying through the sky. This stirred his curiosity, and eventually he asked his ministers, “who are those beings? Are they humans or yakshas? Are they peaceful or malevolent?” The ministers informed him that they were the disciples of a prince from a neighboring kingdom who had abdicated the throne, become a monk, and attained enlightenment. The king instantly developed admiration for these monks, who were truly endowed with great natural powers, and thought that he would like to learn from them. So, he prayed to the Buddha with great faith and invited the Buddha with his retinue of powerful monks to come the next day for a meal. Through his omniscience, the Buddha perceived this invitation and ordered everyone to go to the palace the next day. After they arrived, were formally greeted, and seated at the luncheon, the king sincerely requested teachings that would lead to liberation.

The Buddha started out by saying that one must thoroughly renounce samsara, and that would entail giving up the world and becoming a monk. Most importantly, one must abandon all sensual attachments and experiences, a very traditional Dharma teaching. The king replied, “I’m sorry, but I will not be able to do as you have advised because I am a king. Can you give another teaching that would be more in line with my lifestyle as a layperson and responsibilities as a king? Is there a teaching that integrates experiences into the path?” At that moment, the Buddha and his retinue transformed their bodily appearance from that of monks and nuns to the sambhogakaya form, complete with dakas and dakinis, and wearing all the accoutrements that accompany the deities of secret mantra yoga. They introduced King Indrabhuti into the mandala, explained the tantras, and gave him the oral instructions. The king was an excellent recipient of these teachings, put them into practice, and obtained the experience of the practices. This had such a positive effect on his kingdom that all beings in his realm, not only the humans, attained enlightenment. They all attained the rainbow body, and the kingdom of Uddiyana became completely empty of beings. There are many stories like this from Uddiyana.

So how did the lineage come to be established in central India? In the town of Udavishna, King Bhishu Gyaba became a monk, an ordinary sutra practitioner. After a while, though, he felt he needed more effective methods. He traveled to Uddiyana, received tantra teachings, and brought them all back to central India. Pema Karpo said that King Bhishu Gyaba was actually the Buddha’s son Rahula acting under a concealed name. The great Saraha was his disciple.

It is also important that we study the origins of our own particular tradition. The Kagyu lineage has many instructive stories that are recounted in the life stories of the great masters. Some were translated by Khenchen Rinpoche and published as *The Great Kagyu Masters*, and I recommend you all read that. Pema Karpo wrote a biography of Tilopa that is very interesting, but I don’t think it has been translated into English yet.

In English, we generally use the terminology “tantra.” In Tibetan, the phrase “secret mantra” is more common. They are nearly synonymous, and have a common meaning in their original Sanskrit roots.

The omniscient Pema Karpo said that the meaning of the terms is protection of the mind.

It is important that you understand that tantra can be very dangerous if you practice it improperly. If you are a successful tantric practitioner, you can become enlightened quickly. But we Tibetans have a saying: where there is more benefit, there is more danger. So, if you practice tantra incorrectly, you can find yourself in the hell realms. For instance, mahamudra practice looks easy, but is actually very difficult. The same thing applies to our understanding of emptiness. A misunderstanding of the concept of emptiness can result in us falling away from the middle way onto the sidetrack of nihilism. The important point here is that we must build our practice and knowledge slowly from a proper foundation. At the beginning, it is better to talk about things such as the Six Perfections rather than the mind realizing emptiness. Of course, there are some who accumulated sufficient merit in past lives and, so, are able to practice emptiness directly without re-establishing the foundational understandings. Such persons are extremely rare.

We must first understand all the preliminary teachings before moving on to the more advanced concepts and practices. After all, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths first. Many people consider mahamudra and dzogchen as being more important than the preliminary practices and teachings. Lord Jigten Sumgön taught the opposite—that the preliminary practices are more important than the others. The *Gong Chig* (5:14) says, “what other people consider to be common teachings are here regarded as profound.” It is crucial that we understand the beginning teachings. If we do not, we will never understand mahamudra. My uncle told me that his lama considered the *ngöndro* (preliminary) practices to be so important that he required his students to complete them four or five times.

The Common Preliminaries

All tantric practices have three preliminary practices in common: refuge, bodhicitta, and the four immeasurables.

1. *Refuge*

Any yogi who wishes to practice the arising stage and mantra recitation of a deity must first take refuge. Lord Jigten Sumgön taught that taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the dividing line between being a Buddhist or not. When speaking of the importance of refuge, Lord Jigten Sumgön said that a person who is as dull and unintelligent as a sheep can be called a Buddhist if he takes refuge, whereas even a great scholar, a pandita, cannot be counted among the Buddhists if he does not.

Taking refuge within our mental continuum can be considered the start of the path to buddhahood. The following story from the time of the Buddha illustrates this:

One time, the Buddha restrained Mara by tying him to a tree through his “samadhi-rope.”

Mara begged to be released. The Buddha agreed to free Mara on the condition that he take refuge in the Three Jewels. So he recited the threefold refuge. The Buddha said, “Now that you have taken refuge, you will definitely become enlightened,” and released him. Mara thought he had bested the Buddha, and laughed at him saying, “You are a liar! I didn’t really take refuge. I only recited the words with my mouth, not with my heart, so I won’t become enlightened.” The Buddha calmly responded, “Even so, the very words of refuge are so powerfully virtuous that even ‘fake refuge’ will set you on the path to enlightenment.”

Although we chant a lot, our minds often wander in many directions while we do so. Still, that virtuous speech alone can produce some virtue.

How do we know that our refuge practice is succeeding? When your mind automatically turns toward the Three Jewels. Let’s say you are sleeping one night and all of a sudden, you have a terrific nightmare. In this nightmare, you are falling and it looks as though you will die. In order to be saved from this situation, you immediately think of the Three Jewels instead of looking for external help. You can use the nightmare as a test to see if you will take refuge in an emergency. If even in sleep you rely on the Three Jewels for protection, that is genuine refuge.

When we go through the *bardo*, the intermediate state between this life and the next, many of us become very frightened. However, one who has a strong belief in the Three Jewels and a strong refuge practice will remember the Three Jewels and have a chance to be reborn in Dewachen or another pure land. In Dewachen, the sound of Dharma is heard day and night; everything is about Dharma. But even if we are reborn in a pure land where conditions are perfect for Dharma practice, we will still have to work hard to purify our obscurations. Without practice, we cannot attain enlightenment no matter where we find ourselves.

Think about it—conditions here seem pretty good for Dharma practice, yet how many people are acquainted with the Dharma? Of them, how many actually practice the Dharma? This is a really small number. If a person spent just five hours a day practicing and lived for sixty years, it would result in only ten years or so of practice. This is not much. The question of whether one really has the freedom and leisure to practice Dharma is more complex than whether there is enough time. Sometimes we are lazy, sometimes we have to cook, sleep, and take care of our needs. These things all take time. Then there are those of you who are working; you have no choice but to devote many hours of the day with no mindfulness. Then your mind is so agitated that you cannot practice well even when you have a chance to sit. Thus, if practitioners have that much difficulty with their practice and so much time must be given to non-practice activities, then there is a strong reason to wish to be reborn in Dewachen.

What constitutes our refuge? The Buddha is the teacher; Dharma is the teaching and protector; and the Sangha is the supreme guide. Of the three objects of refuge, the most important is the second, the Dharma. This is why we do not place anything, even images of the Buddha, on top of texts. In our food offering, we say that the precious Dharma is the supreme protection from the sufferings of

samsara. How do we gain this protection? We gain this protection by practicing. The only way we do this is by taking refuge. In the tantric traditions, we have several different set of refuges. The four refuges are composed of the lama, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; the five refuges are composed of the lama, yidam deity, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; and the six refuges are composed of the lama, yidam deity, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and Dharma protectors who possess the eye of wisdom. The seven refuges are the lama, yidam deity, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, dakas and dakinis, and the Dharma protectors who possess the eye of wisdom.

We specify “protectors who possess the eye of wisdom” because there are two different types of protectors: enlightened, such as Mahakala or Achi, and unenlightened. It is not a good idea to take refuge in unenlightened protectors, because they are samsaric beings who cannot lead us to liberation.

When we say, “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha most excellent,” the Sangha we are referring to is the enlightened, or *arya*, Sangha consisting of great bodhisattvas and arhats, those who have achieved that *arya* state. A group of four or more holy, purely ordained ones is also an appropriate object of refuge.

In the prayer, “By the merit of generosity and other good deeds, may I attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings,” the Tibetan word *sonam* has been translated as “other good deeds.” *Sonam* means merit, but one cannot attain buddhahood just through the accumulation of merit. His Holiness the Dalai Lama suggests that the wording should be *tsognam* instead of *sonam* because *tsognam* refers to the accumulation of merit in a plural sense. That would make it more clear that there are two different types of energies to be accumulated, that of merit and of wisdom.

All our deity yoga practices begin with a recitation of the threefold refuge. This recitation can be enhanced with a simple visualization, whether it is written into the text or not. Before chanting the refuge prayer, visualize that the deity who you will be practicing appears instantly in front of you, slightly above the level of your third eye. The deity embodies the Three Jewels: the deity’s body is the sangha, the deity’s speech is the dharma, and the deity’s mind is the buddha. Then recite the refuge prayer, with the deity as the object of refuge. Most texts instruct us to recite the prayer three times to emphasize the importance of taking refuge. Three recitations is the minimum. Ideally, we would recite this prayer until we attain certainty in our heart, but in the meantime recite it three times with deep sincerity. Then after taking refuge, visualize that the deity transforms into light and dissolves into you. You are filled with the light of wisdom and blessings.

2. *Bodhicitta*

On the Buddhist path there are two essential elements: *bodhicitta* and wisdom. Like the two wings of a bird, both are needed to fly. No one can become a buddha if they lack one, to say nothing of lacking both.

Bodhicitta is a Sanskrit word: *bodhi* means enlightened and *citta* means mind. Thus, *bodhicitta* is

often translated as “the mind of enlightenment.” The essence of generating bodhicitta is the desire to achieve complete and perfect enlightenment for the benefit of others. The *Ornament of Clear Realization* (*Abhisamayalamkara*) says that the cultivation of bodhicitta is the desire for enlightenment for others’ benefit.

While there are many ways to classify bodhicitta, the most common classification is two-fold: aspiration bodhicitta and engaged bodhicitta. Aspiration bodhicitta is the desire to achieve buddhahood. In other words, it is making a commitment to the result, buddhahood. Engaged bodhicitta puts that aspiration into practice, by working toward the result through the bodhisattva’s training in the six paramitas. It is making a commitment to the causes of buddhahood.

The *Ten Dharmas Sutra* (*Dasadharmakasutra*) lists four factors that cause us to generate bodhicitta:

1. Seeing the beneficial effects of bodhicitta
2. Developing devotion for the Thus-gone One
3. Seeing the suffering of migrating beings
4. Inspiration of a spiritual master.

Tradition has handed down two methods of generating bodhicitta in our mind: one from Asanga, found in the *Ornament of the Mahayanasutra*, and one from Shantideva, recorded in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva’s Conduct*.

Asanga’s tradition employs cause and effect using seven precepts:

1. The first precept is to recognize all sentient beings as one’s mother.
2. The second precept is to remember their kindness. In the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Gampopa mentions four different types of kindness: the kindness of giving you a body; the kindness of protecting you from harm; the kindness of undergoing hardships on your behalf; and the kindness of giving you knowledge. When we consider these four kindnesses, we are not limited to thinking about our biological mother from this lifetime. These kindnesses could come from four different people, from more than four people, or from less than four. According to Gampopa, we must remember everyone who has been kind to us. Lord Jigten Sumgön recommended that, as a starting point for generating bodhicitta, you should recall the person who has been the kindest to you in this life.
3. The third of Asanga’s precepts is to feel a need to repay the kindnesses done to you. For example, even ordinary beings must pay back the kindnesses of others or people will not respect them. So clearly we must reciprocate the kindnesses of our “mothers,” otherwise we would be ashamed of our ingratitude.
4. The fourth precept is delight or heartwarming love based on the benefit of others. Without being heartwarming, love can actually be dangerous. An example of this is someone who says, “I love chicken.” That person really enjoys the meat of the chicken, so their love is dangerous to the chickens! With heartwarming love, you take care of what you love. It is unconditional. Jigten Sumgön gives the example of the feeling a mother has upon seeing a treasured child.
5. The fifth precept is compassion. When you see the suffering of the six realms, you see the suffering of your own mothers. The response is automatically compassion. Jigten Sumgön’s example of compassion of the feeling one has upon seeing someone suffering from leprosy.

6. The sixth precept is resolute intention. The word “resolute” is sometimes translated as “faithful,” but not in the sense of devotion, but rather it refers to deep sincerity. Love and compassion toward sentient beings without self-benefit or self-interest is the resolute intention.

7. Finally, the seventh precept is the actual generation of bodhicitta. The previous six precepts are the causes, and the seventh is the result of those causes.

In Shantideva’s tradition, one generates bodhicitta by exchanging oneself and others. In this case, first we have to measure how many others exist in comparison to oneself. From this perspective, the many are clearly more important than a single self. We are never satisfied, never get the peace and happiness we long for. If we try to please just ourselves, desires multiply like a thirsty person who drinks salty water. By striving to please ourselves, we develop more suffering and less happiness. In contrast, observe how much happiness and satisfaction comes from helping even one person. Please read Shantideva’s discussion of this topic in the *Engaging in the Bodhisattva’s Conduct*.

Why maintain two traditions? Pema Karpo says that they address the needs of two levels of practitioners. Asanga’s tradition is for the dull-minded beginning bodhisattva, and represents the early parts of the path. Shantideva’s method is intended for the high level bodhisattvas, for practitioners with a sharp mind.

3. The Four Immeasurables

The Four Immeasurables prayer begins with “May all mother sentient beings. . .” When we say “all mother sentient beings,” we should recall that we have all lived many different lives. We know this because of the predispositions we have when we are born. For instance, some children seem to be naturally very kind while some seem to like harming others. These predispositions are habits we have from previous lives. Some people show talent for math and quickly understand everything that their teacher tells them about math, while others have difficulty understanding even the basic concepts. Some people can study and memorize long books without much effort, while others struggle to memorize even the shortest passages.

There was a monk who was really horrible at memorizing texts. He could not memorize even four words. But, there were other things at the monastery that he was the best at. He did not have what we might call good learning wisdom, but he had a talent for fixing things; he was a handy person. This shows what habits he had developed in his past lives.

Another example of the influence of past lives is how children brought up in the same home can be completely different. For example, the Buddha, his half brother Nanda, and his cousin Devadatta grew up in the same household together. The Buddha was always compassionate and loving, while Devadatta was ill-tempered and malicious, and Nanda had a lot of attachment.

We must be kind to those who have been kind to us. We have to think about how we can make these people who have helped us become happier because no one is truly happy in samsara. The problem is that we do not know how to truly pay back this debt; we cannot free others from their suffering. Only

a buddha knows how to do this. So, in order to repay these “debts of kindness” to our mother and father and others who have helped us, we must become rich in wisdom ourselves. We must become enlightened. No one can point out the complete happiness of nirvana until they themselves have attained it. In order to show them the path, we must become buddhas.

Practicing the Four Immeasurables – love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – is one of the first steps. If you have love and compassion, bodhicitta can be developed easily. But without love and compassion, you cannot generate bodhicitta, and if bodhicitta is missing you cannot achieve enlightenment. Without love and compassion, you may find yourself feeling jealousy instead of sympathetic joy when you see someone else’s success. It is important to keep in mind that it is crucial to have equanimity along with love and compassion. If you are attached to ideas, people, and so forth, you may easily become angry. If you are attached to individuals, you will not easily expand your love and compassion to all sentient beings. So, it is important to establish equanimity along with love, compassion, and sympathetic joy.

In the first full line of the prayer, we aspire for all sentient beings to “have happiness and the causes of happiness.” Thus, it is important to consider what we mean by happiness. Happiness results from a mind filled with love and compassion, while suffering results from a mind filled with anger and animosity. One time, I went to Washington, D.C. where there were many different religious groups advocating debt forgiveness for poor countries from the World Bank. My English was not very good back then. I tried to teach them about the mantra of compassion, OM MANI PADME HUNG. I told them that even though the idea of a deity of compassion and a mantra of compassion may be unique to the Buddhist system of thought, compassion itself is not a uniquely religious concept. It does not matter what religion you practice. When we are compassionate, we are comfortable, our mind feels at ease because compassion is the nature of our mind.

Once, an old man who walked with a cane because of great pain in his knees asked Dza Patrul Rinpoche what compassion means. Rinpoche said that compassion is like hearing that your mother is in real danger, that she is being attacked by a pack of wild and ferocious dogs. You run as fast as you can to help her. In that moment, you forget the pain in your knees and run to her—that is compassion.

People often think that cultivating and embodying love and compassion are easy. This is untrue. Generating true love and compassion is actually very difficult, as are practices like *tonglen*. One time, Shariputra encountered a man who asked Shariputra to give him one of his eyes. Without hesitation, Shariputra ripped out one of his eyes and handed it to the man. To his surprise, the man threw the eyeball on the ground and crushed it with his foot. Shariputra was horrified, and asked the man why he did this. The man told Shariputra that he wanted to hear what the eyeball would sound like when it was being crushed. Shariputra became so disheartened at this that he gave up bodhicitta, thinking that it was impossible to make all sentient beings happy. Though it is not easy to be a bodhisattva, it also is not impossible for many bodhisattvas have become enlightened.

Then we continue with, “May they be liberated from suffering and the causes of suffering. May they never be separated from the joy that is free from sorrow. May they rest in equanimity, free from attachment and aversion.” We can think of what Lord Jigten Sumgön said about love. One kind of love is like a mother looking at her child. This is genuine love, but is not the great love because attachment is mixed with this kind of love. Real bodhisattva-love is when you feel loving kindness for all sentient beings equally. If you have this great love, you will automatically feel compassion for someone who has a horrible sickness no matter whether they are a relative, a stranger, or an enemy. Thus, this is the meaning of equanimity--a feeling of impartial closeness, not universal indifference.

The Uncommon Preliminary Practices

1. Purification

Next, we will consider practices that are unique to the Vajrayana or are at least emphasized more in Tibetan Buddhism than in other forms of Buddhism. The first such uncommon practice is purification. Why do we need this practice? Among the eight obstacles to concentration is guilt. When you feel guilty, you cannot concentrate properly and cannot realize the deity state. Thus, it is important to purify or eliminate feelings of guilt, which will allow you to concentrate single pointedly.

In the practice of purification, the four powers or opponent forces are essential.

1. The power of remorse. Using the power of remorse allows us to see our faults and nonvirtuous deeds for what they are. We know that there are consequences of non-virtuous deeds, that they bring suffering. When you do something wrong, you feel uncomfortable; sometimes you can't eat or sleep.
2. The power of reliance. The power of reliance involves relying on the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. If one relies on them with confidence, one is released from fears, as when one relies on a powerful person for protection. But don't hope that the Three Jewels will fix you! You have to respect the Buddha, and follow the instructions of the Dharma, and must receive support from the community, the Sangha. In the Vajrayana, Vajrasattva is the main deity on whom we rely for confession and purification because he is the embodiment of the activities of all the buddhas.
3. The power of remedy. The power of antidote can be expressed many different ways, such as confessing in front of the Thirty-five Confession Buddhas or Vajrasattva practice. But basically, all virtuous deeds are antidotes for nonvirtuous deeds. As virtuous deeds become stronger, nonvirtuous deeds fade away as the rising sun overcomes the darkness.
4. The power of resolve. This power consists of the promise to never do the nonvirtuous deed again. If one lacks resolve, then it is impossible to purify. Resolve is an essential part of purification.

2. Guru Yoga

The second uncommon preliminary practice is guru yoga, which cultivates devotion. All the various branches of the Kagyupa say that devotion is the “head” of meditation. Gampopa himself said:

We are the lineage of blessing. There is no way for the realization of mahamudra to enter your mind stream unless you receive the blessing of the lama. Once you receive it, mahamudra realization is not difficult.

The Buddha said, “The ultimate is realized through devotion.”

Atisha said:

Dear friend, we need lamas until we achieve perfect enlightenment, so rely on the spiritual master. We need hearing and contemplation until we realize suchness, so listen to the spiritual master’s instructions. All joy and happiness results from the kindness of the guru, so remember his kindness.

Jigten Sumgön said:

Vajrayana is the path of blessings. Without the blessing of the lama, no matter what you have experienced, it is mere mental projection. Therefore, try to please the lama without sadness or tiredness.

In order to practice Dharma authentically, we must first find a qualified lama, then follow his or her instructions sincerely, and supplicate that lama while truly seeing him as a buddha. In the mahamudra tradition, it is not enough to see the lama as great scholar. It is not enough to see the lama as an arhat, a bodhisattva, or even as nirmanakaya or sambhogakaya. For mahamudra realization, we really must see the lama as dharmakaya. Nothing less will do. If you can see the lama as dharmakaya, it will not be that difficult to realize mahamudra.

In the tantric tradition, it is even more important to be devoted to the lama. First, one must check that the lama is qualified and suitable to guide you, even if it takes ten or twenty years. After that, your lama’s actual status does not matter as much as your confidence in him. If you think your lama is ordinary, then you will receive only worldly blessings. However if you regard your lama as a bodhisattva, then you will receive a bodhisattva’s blessings. If you perceive your lama as fully enlightened, you will receive the blessing of a buddha.

Guru yoga is the root of receiving the blessings of the lama. A qualified lama and a devoted disciple-- this is a combination for realizing emptiness! If you want to learn the details of Guru Yoga practice, please refer to the Ngöndro text and its commentaries..

3. Wheel of Protection

The third uncommon preliminary practice is protection. The Buddha said that where the Dharma is more profound, that’s where there are more obstacles. Therefore, we need protection. Dharma obstacles are not always scary demons. Whatever causes the three poisons to arise in you, those are

your obstacles. When Buddha Shakyamuni was meditating under the bodhi tree, Mara tried to interrupt his meditation with the three poisons. First, he tried to give the Buddha a false message, and this was the poison of ignorance. The Buddha was unmoved, so he was victorious over this obstacle by using the antidote of wisdom awareness. Next, Mara tried to interrupt his meditation with attachment by sending his daughters with beautiful bodies. The Buddha did not respond, and overcame the obstacle of attachment by meditating on ugliness. Third, Mara brought armies and tried to harm the Buddha, but the Buddha overcame hatred by meditating on compassion. For this reason we say that the Buddha was victorious over the three poisons.

We need protection in all aspects of our practice. For example, when we perform rituals and empowerments, we first send away the evil spirits with a tormo. We might regard this as mere ritual, but it has actual effect. In King Trisong Detsen's time, a high minister passed away. A Bonpo master performed a ritual to bring the minister's consciousness into the center of the mandala. But Padmasambhava was there, and said that it was not the minister but an evil spirit who had followed the minister. To prove this, Padmasambhava instructed his disciples to ask the consciousness what secret name he had received during a particular empowerment. The spirit replied that he had been sent away beyond the ocean at that time. Thus, he really was the evil spirit who had been sent away with the tormo ritual at the empowerment. This shows the power of sending away evil spirits at rituals.

The wheel of protection is always visualized; it is not depicted in thangkas nor is it physically present when we build a sand or other material mandala. In longer texts, this visualization may be described in detail, but we can take the time to add it whether it is written in the text or not. It is particularly important to do this once at the beginning of a retreat and again at the end, after the mandala has been dissolved.

There are different ways to visualize the wheel of protection. One translation says to picture a protection tent as wide as the infinity of space between the deity's mandala and its outer wall. This vastness is important because you will be dissolving the ordinary conceptions into the emptiness out of which you will generate yourself as a deity. If your visualization is too small, it will be impossible to generate all the deities, mandalas, assemblies, etc. within it. Your visualization should be very broad since the space will be filled with vajras on the roof, walls, and floor, and covered with vajra-type umbrellas. There is not a single hole that is not filled with vajras. You are within that universe of vajra protection. Visualize that the protection tent is encircled by fire which is surrounded by male and female wrathful deities. The male wrathful deities are facing outside the mandala and the females are facing inside. They fill the space near the tent of protection. Even if your meditation session is going to be short, you should always generate this visualization of the wheel of protection.

Now that you are engaged in the profound teachings of Dharma, external and internal obstructions and obscurations may appear. It may be that you are purifying the infinite negative activities that you accumulated in the past. Or it may be that your practice is being hindered by some sort of evil force that simply dislikes the practice of Dharma. Many of the hindrances you might face will not appear in

the form of evil or a demon, but rather they will appear in the form of friendship or something good that will distract you. It may be difficult to differentiate between demons and actual associates. Demons will sneakily try to obstruct your practice while true friends will try to help you along. For example, if someone is very friendly toward you, but they are leading you away from Dharma, they are not a true friend. Perhaps your Dharma friends or your lamas are shouting at you all the time. Consider that they are trying to save you from falling into even deeper trouble than you may already be in, to show you the right direction. Therefore, you cannot judge a Dharmic enemy by his or her appearance. You must judge by their actions and motivations.

An interesting case of this is Milarepa's aunt and uncle. I am not saying their motivation was good at all, but through their cruelty these two were of great help to Milarepa. If they had not stolen his wealth, he may never have become the Milarepa we know today.

In all circumstances, the best protection is love, compassion, and bodhicitta. Jigten Sumgön is well known for saying, "Bodhicitta is the supreme wheel of protection." Evil spirits cause harm out of hatred. The antidote to their hatred is compassion, so if you have love and compassion you can defeat any of them.

4. Entering the Mandala

To enter a mandala means to receive an empowerment. If we engage in a deity's practice without a prior empowerment, negative results can arise. For example, tantric texts warn that if a lama gives oral instruction to disciples who have not received the associated empowerment, both the lama and disciples could be reborn in the hell realms. Hoping for accomplishment from a practice in which one has not been initiated is like hoping to press oil from dry sand.

There are two kinds of empowerment. We are more familiar with the type received from a qualified teacher at a ceremony. The second kind occurs during certain practices and is called a self-entering mandala or, simply, self empowerment. When a text calls for it, one invites all the tathagatas in the form of the five buddha families, and they bestow the empowerment. Their enlightened wisdom flows into you, purifying all your negative karma and obscurations, until your body is completely filled with wisdom nectar. The nectar overflows onto your head and then transform into the heads of the five buddha families. If you are practicing a wrathful deity, you are adorned with a crown containing skulls, and if you are practicing a peaceful deity, the crown is adorned with jewels.

Conditions for Practice

Before we begin a practice, it is important for us, the beginners, to find a place where there will be little distraction. There is inner quiet and outer quiet. Inner quiet comes from training the mind and allows us to become free from inner distractions. This inner quiet comes slowly. But the outer quiet

is something we can set up by finding a place that is free from noisy outer distractions. It must not be too isolated, so that it is easy to find water and food.

It is good to have an altar to support your practice. There, we can make offerings on a daily basis, or even more often. It is important how we make the offerings. Offerings should be free from all negative emotions such as miserliness, etc. I think offering water makes a lot of sense. When we offer up other materials, we may be a little attached to them. In contrast, when we make a water offering, we do not have any attachment. Since the offering is free from negative emotions, it becomes a pure offering and we accumulate greater merit. Pure offering also refers to materials that were acquired purely, and not by harming another, such as something stolen.

We should know the right way to set up the offering altar. One of the old masters said that the older schools of Tibetan Buddhism set out the offerings from the deity's left to right and the newer schools start the offering on the deity's right. Practices such as Chakrasamvara belong to the mother tantra, where one always sets up the altar from the deity's left to right. In our Kagyu tradition, mother tantras start on the deity's left, which is your right, and in father tantras we start from the deity's right and go to the left. **For general purposes, place offerings on the shrine from the deity's right to the left.**

In terms of your sitting arrangement, always make sure you are sitting comfortably. If you are sitting uncomfortably, your discomfort may distract you in the midst of the practice. Most texts emphasize that a meditator should follow the example of the seven-point posture of Buddha Vairochana. The first of these postural instructions is that you must make your back straight. This is especially important because it allows the air and wind energy to flow smoothly and easily. My own guru in Tibet used to tell us that if you are meditating in the wrong position, sleep will easily climb into your eyes. If you sit upright, it will be much more difficult for sleep to climb into your eyes. The most important thing when sitting is mental clarity. Sitting upright will straighten the channels, the winds will flow more easily and you will have greater mental clarity.

The Actual Practice

I. Generation Stage

The generation stage of deity yoga is where we introduce ourselves to a yidam deity by establishing a visualization. Why do we do this? The visualization serves to liberate the mind from worldly thoughts and perceptions, and allows us to experience what it is to be enlightened. It is a direct antidote to clinging to conventional reality. Later, when we find ourselves clinging to the reality of the deity, we will need to counter that fault with completion stage practices, discussed below.

In the tantric tradition, we utilize the results of the path during practice. Examples of this are the transformation of your environment into divine phenomena and the perception of your lama as a buddha, one who has accomplished the three kayas. The goal of tantric practice is to achieve divine

realization, to become a buddha in actuality. Just now, you know you are not a buddha; you are not in touch with your divine nature. So you visualize yourself as a deity, thus taking the result to be achieved and practicing it directly. In doing so, you increase your familiarization with the result and come closer to buddhahood.

Every time we do this generation practice, it is important to first reinforce our understanding of emptiness, or *shunyata*. Thus, after taking refuge and cultivating bodhicitta, most sadhanas start with the mantra, “OM SWABHAVA SHUDDHA SARVA DHARMA SVABHAVA SHUDDHO HAM.” This translates as, “The self-nature of all reality is pure; remain in that state.” This means that the essential nature of everything, of *all* phenomena, is empty of inherent existence and has been since beginningless time. With this recitation, we should return to that state and remain in that sphere of reality for a little while. By meditating on the primordial purity of all-pervading emptiness, we purify the confusion of grasping at the duality of samsara and nirvana. Currently, our mind sees samsara and nirvana as being different because of our dualistic conceptions and grasping. In order to transform this mistaken conception of reality, we recall the ultimate reality of phenomena, which is empty of self-existence and pure from beginningless time.

There are four classes of tantra, and each emphasizes a different type of relationship between the practitioner and the deity. Both action (*kriya*) and performance (*charya*) tantra maintain a distance between the meditator and the deity, which is to say that the deity is generated as an external figure separate from the practitioner. In action tantra, one sees the deity as a being of much higher status than oneself. In performance tantra, one sees the deity more as a friend. In this more advanced form of tantra, the relationship between the devotee and the deity becomes more intimate. In this way, attainments are being shared by one’s friends, as opposed to being bestowed from on high.

In yoga tantra, the relationship between the practitioner and deity is still characterized by duality, but one’s understanding is more subtle than before. Initially, one visualizes oneself in the form of a deity; this is called a samaya being. Then later in the practice, wisdom beings are invited from the ten directions and unite with the samaya being. At that point, the two become inseparable, nondual. In highest (*anuttara*) yoga tantra, one fully comprehends the meaning of nonduality of the deity and oneself. Here, the samaya and wisdom beings are inseparable from the start. Through the practices of *chakras*, *prana*, and so forth, everything is transformed into the enlightened state. These two classes of tantra highlight the difference between merely visualizing nonduality and actually understanding and experiencing it.

Thus, one can see a gradual progression through the four classes of tantra, from the more coarse understanding to the most subtle. Each one matures its practitioners according to their needs and capabilities. That is the reason there are different classes of tantra—they act as stages along the path. If one were introduced to highest yoga tantra too early, there is a danger of encouraging laziness. If, without genuinely understanding nonduality, one adopts the view that one is already enlightened and concludes that no further effort is needed, that is a bar to all progress. Therefore, a gradual

introduction to the four classes of tantra is very important.

There are two systems by which we can approach accomplishing the visualization described in whichever text one is practicing. The first one describes the skills one must have in order for the generation stage practice to be performed well:

1. One should be an expert on emptiness, the ultimate nature of reality.
2. One should be an expert on visualizing sitting on top of a sun and moon disc seat.
3. One should be an expert in transforming the gross, ordinary level of sounds into the sounds of the mantra of the deity being practiced.
4. One should be extremely competent at transforming the ordinary thought process into the symbols of the particular deity.
5. One should know how to visualize oneself as the deity with divine pride.

The second system, according to the yoga tantra, describes the sequence of visualization, called the five awakenings. They are usually listed as follows:

1. moon seat;
2. sun seat;
3. seed syllable;
4. hand implements;
5. complete form of the deity.

Alternatively, the first step can consist of a meditation on the emptiness of all phenomena, with the second step then being a combination of the moon and sun seats. Either way, we start our visualization process with emptiness by reciting a mantra, or by making the first awakening a meditation on emptiness. After that, we visualize the sun and moon seats sitting on top of a lotus. On top of those two seats, the seed syllable arises and transforms into the hand implements. Finally, the hand implements transform into the complete form of the deity.

The symbolism of the five awakenings is very important to us to understand. Step by step, the five awakenings correspond to, and purify, rebirth from a human womb from the point of leaving the *bardo*, through conception and fetal development, to birth itself. If we understand this well, we can make use of it to guide ourselves to more fortunate rebirths, or even to enlightenment.

1. *Emptiness.* If you do not achieve enlightenment in this life, after death you will have an opportunity to achieve it during the intermediate state between this life and the next rebirth. At the moment of death, one first experiences dharmata, suchness, or ultimate reality. Then every week in the intermediate state, one has another death and rebirth, each one with another dharmata experience. These are all very similar to the first awakening, the meditation on emptiness. At the very end, when one finally leaves the intermediate state, there is also an experience of passing through dharmata. If you have a good understanding of the quintessential teachings and instructions of your guru, you can recognize and realize the clear light of bliss at these times.

2. *Two seats.* If you miss the opportunity in the bardo again, the mind will go wherever the force of your karmic accumulation pushes it, for instance into a womb. Conception involves the subtlest level of consciousness. This most subtle consciousness will take up residence between the two drops of the father and the mother, the semen of the father (the white element) and the egg of the mother (the red element). The white and red elements are the physical basis to which the mind consciousness comes and forms a being. The white and red elements are the “seat” of the consciousness in the same way that the red sun and white moon seats of the second awakening are the seat of the deity’s consciousness.

3. *Seed syllable.* The red and white elements are not naturally fused together. They are conjoined by the attitudes of attachment and aversion that the new being brings. During the initial stages of conception, if one is going to be born a male, then one has attachment toward one’s mother and aversion toward the father. If one is going to be born female, these are reversed. This is what binds the red and white elements together; if those mental predispositions were lacking, they would not fuse and a new being could not be born there. The initial mixture of the red and white elements with the consciousness is similar to the third awakening, the seed syllable.

4. *Hand implements.* After a few weeks, the fetus starts to take shape as a recognizably human form. That corresponds to the fourth awakening, the hand implements.

5. *Complete form of the deity.* As for the fifth awakening, the complete body of the deity is the final stage of the generation stage, the stage at which the deity is fully formed with all the accouterments. That correlates to the stage at which the baby is fully formed just prior to being born. It is important to conduct the generation stage properly so that we do not encounter unexpected results. There are three techniques that help keep us going in the right direction: clarity, purity, and divine pride.

1. *Clarity.* To achieve a clear visualization of the deity’s form, one needs training. Most beginners cannot do this naturally, so we must learn how to do it. There are two methods of training in visualization. One is to focus on the deity’s third eye, and visualize that much clearly. When this visualization is stable, move to the deity’s two eyes, then slowly add the rest of the face, the upper body, and eventually the deity’s entire form. The other way to train in visualization is to begin by focusing on the crown of the deity’s head. Slowly scan downward to the lotus seat, and then back up again. If you cannot do either of these, just try to visualize the seed syllable, or use the training syllable HUNG, and focus on being mindful while chanting the mantra.

As with any kind of meditation practice, your visualization can become dull and you can feel sleepy after a while. At those times, you should enhance your clarity. There are many different methods to enhance your meditation practice. For example, when you are focusing on the details of the deity, try making them more colorful.

2. *Purity.* The second characteristic of visualization is purity. The essence of all the deities is naturally pure. This purity is represented by their various attributes, each one displaying an aspect of their qualities. Each attribute contributes an important meaning that helps us understand and actualize the richness of the qualities of a buddha. In this way, each and every attribute and ornament has a necessary and symbolic meaning. Another way purity is depicted is with a white OM on the deity's forehead, a red AH at the throat, and a blue HUNG at the heart. These symbolize the pureness of body, speech and mind.

All the ornaments, colors, postures, and so forth are symbolic. While the deity's attributes help us comprehend the depth and breadth of his qualities, it is important that we focus on achieving the qualities themselves and not concretize these attributes as being substantial. They are tools to help us uncover our own natural purity. The attributes are similar to the labels on bottles of medicine. Each label describes the features of the medicine contained inside—how strong it is, what sickness it remedies, and so forth. In a similar way, the deity's "labels" are his color, appearance, and ornaments that tell us about his inner qualities.

3. *Divine, or Stable, Pride.* This kind of pride is not a contrivance, nor is it one of the afflicting emotions. Divine pride is special to deity yoga, and has to do with our confidence in actually being a deity ourselves. Assuming a deity's form is not an artificial invention, but rather is a connection to something inherent within us—the buddha nature that only needs to be revealed. Some hold a mistaken view that visualizations are imaginary. They conclude that visualization does not reflect a genuine reality by reasoning, "Anyone can plainly see that we have two arms and one head, not 1,000. How could this visualization be anything but imaginary?" In fact, the generated image is in accord with our true existence. If we were to meditate on ourselves in a way that did not exist, there could be no useful result from it. However, because we are already primordially divine, meditating on yidams will produce the intended result of buddhahood. Generation stage practice is not a matter of getting rid of all our psycho-physical components and substituting a deity's in their place. Eliminating one thing and substituting another—that would be an imaginary phenomenon! Rather, we are purifying or training our aggregates so that they return to their pure state.

The point of the generation stage of tantra is to free the mind from ordinary conceptions. That frees to actually experience what it means to be a deity. When we talk about divine pride, we do not mean that our ordinary, samsaric "self" has somehow become a deity, but rather that we perceive ourselves as empty of inherent existence. You can come to understand this in two ways. The first is by receiving instructions that directly point out the nature of mind. One who has received such a teaching can see that his own mind and the dharmakaya are inseparable. The second way is to gain knowledge by analyzing emptiness. Detailed analysis allows you to see that your mind is empty, and that emptiness is not different from dharmadhatu. From that, you can see that the innate nature of your mind and dharmakaya are inseparable.

In case you are practicing yoga tantra, we will discuss the process of uniting the samaya and wisdom

beings. First, the wisdom beings are invited by means of light radiating from the forehead, representing one's body; the throat, representing speech; and heart, representing mind. Your light radiates into the ten directions. It returns to you as the deity whose form you have assumed, into whom you have generated yourself. The wisdom deities come from every direction and in every size, and enter your forehead, throat, and heart. They unite inseparably with your body, speech and mind.

Some texts use the mantra DZA HUNG BAM HO to support the visualization of the samaya and wisdom beings becoming nondual. First, visualize the samaya being, that is, yourself as a deity. The wisdom being will exactly replicate that self-generated deity and become one within you. The four syllables are usually regarded as representing four female deities:

As you recite the syllable DZA, think that it is the sound of invitation, as if saying, "please come here." At the same time, visualize that a white female deity holds a vajra-hook that draws the wisdom beings toward you.

As you recite the syllable HUNG, regard it as the sound of welcome, something like, "please have a seat." A yellow female deity holds a vajra-lasso that ties the wisdom and samaya beings together, symbolizing that they become one.

As you recite the syllable BAM, think that you are requesting the wisdom deity to stay, "Please let us stay together forever." A red female deity holds an iron chain that binds the two of you inseparably--one until enlightenment is reached.

As you recite the syllable HO, think that it is a joyful sound. You rejoice at the achievement of uniting the wisdom beings with the samaya being; the deities are pleased that beings are benefitted by this practice. A green female deity holds a bell and rings it, signifying that the wisdom beings who were hooked, brought back, and united with the samaya being are stabilized.

Performing this visualization with strong feelings helps us to develop divine pride. When the wisdom deities dissolve into us, we receive blessings directly from the deity, and all the buddhas and bodhisattvas who entered us. Going through the process of inviting, dissolving, and binding the wisdom beings into ourselves reinforces the conviction, "Now, I am the true deity."

As a further uncommon preliminary practice, some sadhanas follow the union of the wisdom and samaya beings with a self empowerment. This is begun with light radiating from the syllable HUNG at your heart, which invites the five empowerment buddhas into the sky in front of you. Make offerings of flowers, incense, light, scented fragrance, and food to them, and then request empowerment by reciting the mantra, "OM SARVA TATHAGATHA ABHIKHIHINTSATU MAM."

Visualize that the buddhas of empowerment holding vases of wisdom nectar, which they pour over you while reciting, "OM SARVA TATHAGATHA ABHISHEKATA SAMAYA SHRIYE HUNG."

This vase initiation is the first of the four types of initiation, and has special significance. The substance in the vase is divine nectar that causes you to purify your mental continuum. You visualize

tasting the nectar, by which all the negativities ever committed with your body, speech, or mind are purified. The nectar fills every part of your body and overflows out the crown of your head. The overflow nectar forms into a deity or a crown, according to whichever text you are using. Finally, all the five buddhas of the initiation dissolve into you. A second, more elaborate offering is done, this time to the deity being practiced. There are different mudras to use for external and internal offerings. At this moment, it is very beneficial if you can remain firmly based in divine pride, generating yourself as the deity with as much clarity as possible.

Stay with the visualization as long as you can. When you are tired from doing the generation stage, then move to the mantra recitation.

2. *Completion Stage*

Completion stage practice has two aspects: with signs and without signs. Practice “with signs” most commonly consists of reciting mantras with full mindfulness of actually being in the deity state. Practicing with chakras and channels is also generally categorized as completion with signs. These are advanced practices that must be learned in person from a qualified lama, not from books. Practice “without signs” is the meditation on emptiness or mahamudra following dissolution of the visualization.

CARING FOR ONE’S MALA

We use a mala, or rosary, to count the mantras we recite bead by bead; it also serves as a support for our concentration. Generally, we employ the mala with our left hand. This is because, in tantric tradition, the left hand is used for receiving and the right is used for giving. For example, during a tsok food offering, you receive the nectar with your left hand. Typically, the mala is worked with the right hand only in wrathful practices.

We use the word “wrathful” in the context of the more energetic deities, like Vajrapani. The term does not connote anger, but rather something closer to tough love. Wrathfulness can be an important protection against obstacles; these practices must be thought of as powerful to keep the obscurations at bay. But we cannot forget about compassion. Even wrathful practices must be imbued with compassion. Remember, all appearances of an enlightened being come from compassion. As Khenchen Rinpoche says in *Prescriptions and Proscriptions*, “With undistracted recollection of the divine form, the embodiment of bodhicitta, the clear, pure, and stable generation stage meets the thoroughly established nature face to face.”

Start counting your recitations with the first bead, the one closest to the guru bead, and then proceed step by step toward enlightenment. When you complete a round and reach the other side of the guru bead, turn the mala around and start climbing the ladder toward the bhumis again. The guru bead represents dharmakaya, which is inseparable from your guru.

The thumb is always the master finger when you count mantras. When you are reciting the mantra corresponding to a peaceful deity, use the index finger as you turn the mala. For deities with powerful aspects, red colors, use the middle finger. With a deity of increasing power, use the ring finger. The mantras of wrathful deities are counted against the pinkie finger.

The construction of the mala itself has an influence on one's practice. For example, some people use a guru bead of three colors: blue for dharmakaya, red for sambhogakaya, and white for nirmanakaya. In our Drigung tradition the dharmakaya, or Vajradhara, is blue; the sambhogakaya, or Vairochana, is white; and the nirmanakaya, or Buddha Shakyamuni, is golden.

The thread holding the mala together is especially important, as it is related to the success of your practice.

- * If the thread is too loose there will be gaps between the beads, making it impossible to reach the goal.

- * If the spaces between beads is too long, you will be far from contact with the deity. It will be difficult to maintain awareness while doing the practice.

- * If the space between beads is too tight, you may encounter obstacles to your life span.

- * If the thread breaks, replace the entire string. It would be best to restore the mala within twenty-four hours. Making a knot in the thread will become an obstacle to your practice.

- * Mala strings can be made by twisting different strands together. Three strands represent the three kayas, five strands represent the five buddha families, and nine threads represent the nine yantras.

In general, do not use a mala of defective quality to avoid bringing degenerative energies into your practice. The best beads to use are seeds from the bodhi tree. Regardless of its material, be careful where your mala comes from. Those who have committed the five heinous acts, butchers, thieves, and so forth are impure sources; do not use malas from them. You cannot use a mala that has been taken from another. Especially do not use a mala that had been given to a deity as an offering. You cannot take a mala from a deity's statue and convert it your personal use. Malas that have been burned in a fire, submerged in mire, run over by animals, or partially eaten by birds or insects should not be used.

You can bless your own mala like this: Place the mala in your left hand, wound in close circles with the guru bead on top. Cover it with your right hand. Visualize that the left hand is the moon disk, the right hand is the sun disk, the guru bead is whichever deity you are practicing, and the rest of the beads are the retinue. If that deity has no retinue, then the whole mala can be visualized as the single deity. Recite the following mala blessing mantras and then blow on the mala if you like.

Recite these two mantras seven times each:

OM RU TSI RA MA NI PRA WAR TA YA HUNG PHAT

OM HRI PAD MA NIR TI SHVA RI HUNG

Then, recite OM AH HUNG for one round of the mala.

In a practice session, this can be done after the generation stage and before the mantra recitation or at the beginning of the session just after the opening prayers in accordance with whatever text you are using. When you are done with the mala blessing, visualize that the deity transforms back into the mala. Then meditate for as long as possible in the arising stage on the deity's body as an illusion inseparable from the emptiness nature wisdom.

Once you bless your mala, it is important that you care for it. Do not give it to people who have broken samaya, such as people who have killed a monk or nun, destroyed a stupa, or committed one of the five heinous acts. Do not let your mala fall into the hands of a butcher or thief, for then you would lose whatever blessings your mantra or mala has. If an animal steps over your mala, you will lose its blessing. Malas should be kept in a high place. If you do highest yoga tantric practice, do not even show your mala to other people. You can keep it in a small bag or other container so others do not see it accidentally.

VISUALIZING THE MANTRA

Visualize the seed syllable that corresponds to the deity being practiced in the deity's heart; this is the enlightened mind. Visualize it as thin as possible, as thin as a slice of a hair that has been sliced lengthwise a hundred times. This helps to stabilize the mind. Some texts mention visualizing the syllable as facing forward, and some mention the syllable as facing sideways. Both are correct. The seed syllable is surrounded by the mantra circling clockwise. If you can visualize the seed syllable and the mantra clearly, it leaves an imprint and you will be able to accomplish the practice much faster and in more detail.

The rotating mantra radiates light that carries offerings to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Their wisdom energy, compassion, and power return to you in the form of light. The light radiates again, this time to all sentient beings, and purifies all phenomena. The suffering of the obscurations and diseases of all the sentient beings in the six realms are completely purified. The beings are established in the realm of the deity, thus accomplishing all virtuous activities. The best virtuous activity is, of course, to help others. So, here, you are helping others by releasing them from all different types of suffering. The light returns and is reabsorbed into the seed syllable.

RECITING THE MANTRA

When you recite the mantra, you should be free from six types of faults:

1. Reciting the mantra too fast. In doing so, you distort the speech process and your pronunciation will be inexact. You may even miss some syllables. This can cause a shortening of your life span.
2. Reciting the mantra too slowly. This makes it very difficult to reach the required number of recitations, such as 100,000 or a million.

3. Reciting the mantra too loudly. This can attract the attention of malevolent beings who oppose the Dharma, and who will then interfere with your practice. Saying the mantra in a wrathful manner harms the demi-god realm, and they may be able to harm you and your practices.

4. Reciting the mantra too quietly. One's voice should not be too loud or too soft. The proper volume is such that you can just hear yourself. Even if you are reciting the mantra mentally, you still need to include every sound and syllable,

5. Reciting the mantra too roughly. Saying the mantra too forcefully affects your physical well-being negatively. It can disturb the balance of elements, and your health will suffer.

6. Reciting the mantra too gently. Being too gentle or timid will not invoke the power of the mantra.

There are a few other guidelines related to mantra recitation:

* Avoid onions and garlic. Their smell is too strong, and eating them will kill nine days' worth of the power of the mantra you have recited.

* Engaging in the nonvirtues associated with speech—lying, divisive speech, harsh words, and idle talk—can destroy the mantras you have accumulated through countless eons of time or at least diminish their effects.

* As a general rule, avoid interruptions while you are performing a sadhana, and especially while you are reciting a mantra. If someone talks to you and you answer them in conversation, you should go back four beads and repeat them. If you cough, go back five beads; if you yawn, three; if you sneeze, ten; if you spit, one bead.

* Perhaps it goes without saying, but it is important to maintain your visualization of the seed syllable and the mantra while you recite the mantra, and to do as many recitations as you can.

While you are reciting the mantra, briefly review your deity visualization from time to time. Your main focus should be on the mantra, so just recall the deity enough to remember it. There is no need to retain as much detail as you had in the generation stage, but the visualization is not completely lost either.

Please take these guidelines seriously. If you apply these methods and techniques properly, the effectiveness of the mantras you recite will be much stronger.

3. *Dissolution*

When we are establishing a visualization, we start from the center and move outward. When we dissolve the visualization we start from the outside and move toward the center. The wisdom being and samaya being may be dissolved together or separately. In either case, the general sequence of dissolution is:

1. The whole universe dissolves into the sentient beings contained within it.
2. The sentient beings dissolve into the deity's retinue.
3. The retinue dissolves into the deity.
4. The deity dissolves into the three syllables, OM at the forehead, AH at the throat, and HUNG at the heart.

5. The OM dissolves down into the AH, and the AH into the HUNG or the seed syllable.
6. The HUNG dissolves from the bottom up, until finally only the nada (dot) on top of the HUNG remains.
7. The nada becomes smaller and more subtle, until it becomes almost invisible and dissolves into the dharmakaya. The dharmakaya, all-pervasive emptiness, is the ultimate state of the mind of sentient beings. This clear light bliss is pure from the beginning, totally free from any type of elaboration. Place your mind into that clear awareness, that pure awareness, and remain in that meditation as long as you are able. Just relax into the unobscured, uncreated state. This final dissolution is the practice of the completion stage without signs.

Since there is no separation between the wisdom and samaya beings in highest yoga tantra, there one dissolves the deity within oneself, and then into all-pervading emptiness.

When arising from the meditation, instantaneously visualize yourself again in the deity's form, appearing suddenly like a fish jumping out of the water. This time there is no retinue or consort, just the single, main deity. Start the dedication prayers without allowing any conceptual thoughts to interrupt your mind. If conceptual thoughts intervene, especially negative ones, they can destroy the merit of the practice before you get a chance to dedicate them. Shantideva said that one moment of anger can destroy one hundred eons of merit.

Dedication

Dedication is like a savings account for your virtue. Therefore, we should dedicate ourselves to the highest possible purpose: achievement of the omniscient mind for the sake of all sentient beings. Lesser goals, such as mundane wealth, material possessions, reputation, or physical well-being, are not worthy.

There are concise and elaborate ways of doing the dedication practice. The fourth chapter of the famous *Gong Chig* explains the reasons for doing dedication practices, and the benefits of doing so. You can also find details on how one should perform dedication practices in Shantideva's *Engaging in the Conduct of Bodhisattvas*. In that text, the chapter on dedication recommends reciting, "Through the virtue of this practice, may I become the deity." This does not mean that you turn into someone else. Rather, with your ordinary senses and conceptions subdued via your visualization, the defilements in your mental continuum are gradually eliminated. Your own buddha nature is revealed, which is the equivalent of the nature of every deity.

Dedication is similar to a request, but this is a request we make of ourselves. If you want to become president, you must request support from other people. Becoming a deity is not like that; no one can make us have realization. We can only realize the truth through our own power and effort. Not even a buddha, one with great compassion and great power, can give you realization. So, we have to check

ourselves every day. At the end of the day, examine what you did that day. If you studied or practiced well, then give yourself good food and good sleep. If you did not do well, then do not reward yourself with dinner. This is a way to gain some control over your practice.

Conclusion

I invite everyone to engage in deity yoga practices. Keep the following disciplines faithfully in order to achieve personal and world peace. Actually, it is vital that we first develop peace within ourselves, and have love and compassion for ourselves. If you really have love and compassion for yourself, then you can pass it on to others. Without them, you have nothing to pass on to others. If you can make your own mind peaceful, then you can help others achieve peace. With equanimity, we can find love and compassion.

1. *Suffering*

One Tibetan scholar says that even an ant, a creature that has no eyes, is continuously running around collecting things to relieve his suffering. People, too, tend to think that material wealth is the source of happiness. This could be true temporarily, but material wealth alone cannot lead to enduring happiness. If you analyze carefully, you will see that material wealth can just as often be the source of unhappiness. There's an expression in Tibetan: if you have one big sheep you have suffering the size of a big sheep; if you have a horse, you have suffering the size of a horse. Whatever possessions we have, we have to worry about protecting them, caring for them, increasing them, and so forth. In the human realm, suffering and joy always go together. Genuine happiness that comes from the Dharma can never bring suffering.

The Buddha taught about the practice of generosity first, because generosity is the true cause of wealth. Jigten Sumgön said that worldly effort the size of a mountain is worth less than a drop of meritorious effort.

Nirvana is a state where there is no suffering and there is unchanging, indestructible, complete happiness. When a person attains nirvana, they are completely selfless, totally free from attachment and aversion. Nirvana is the unchanging great joy. To attain nirvana, you do not have to take an airplane; you can attain nirvana right here with this body. Sometimes people think of nirvana as being far away, outside this lifetime, but this view is incorrect.

2. *Karma*

Everyone must face suffering at some point in their life. Those who understand karma are able to accept it with a good attitude and deal with the situation positively. They don't have to ask, "Why is this happening to me?" and fight against the problem. They know it is simply the result of their own past action, and that it will pass through impermanence.

3. *Devotion*

One day, the Buddha asked one of his disciples what excellent virtue is. The disciple responded by saying nirvana. "How do you attain nirvana?" the Buddha asked. The disciple responded that devotion was the key. One of the masters of the Drukpa lineage, named Gotsangpa, said that all of our lineage masters like Marpa, Milerepa, Gampopa, Phagmo Drupa, and others, worked hard on the path of practices. So, if we have great devotion for them, we can realize mahamudra very easily.

What is this great devotion? There are two main types of devotion: faith devotion and wisdom devotion. Faith devotion comes from trust in your lineage; you practice, using that devotion as a catalyst. Wisdom devotion evolves from faith and understanding. Naropa is an example of one who had great faith devotion. Faith devotion is very useful if you are extremely cautious about where you place your faith. Wisdom devotion arises after you have learned from others. These two types of devotion are especially good when they work together. Think of them as being like the brain and the heart. Khenchen Rinpoche says that the brain is like your office and the heart is like your home. It is not good to spend too much time at the office.

Devotion also opens us to the blessings of the guru. Saraha said that two factors are needed to achieve a direct realization of emptiness: the accumulation of merit and the blessings of the guru.