

## ***Sacred Outlook:***

### ***The Practice of Vajrayogini<sup>1</sup>***

*"Experiencing the vajra mind of Vajrayogini is so deep and vast that if thoughts arise, they do not become highlights: they are small fish in a huge ocean of space."*

The Vajrayana, the tantric teaching of the Buddha, contains tremendous magic and power. Its magic lies in its ability to transform confusion and neurosis into awakened mind and to reveal the everyday world as a sacred realm. Its power is that of unerring insight into the true nature of phenomena and of seeing through ego and its deceptions.

According to the tantric tradition, the vajrayana is regarded as the complete teaching of the Buddha: it is the path of complete discipline, complete surrender, and complete liberation. It is important to realize, however, that the vajrayana is firmly grounded in the basic teachings of the sutrayana, the teachings of egolessness and compassion.

Frequently, the exceptional strength and efficacy of the vajrayana are misunderstood as a promise of instant enlightenment. But one cannot become enlightened overnight; in fact, it is highly deceptive and even dangerous to think in such a way. Without exception, the Buddhist teachings point to the erroneous belief in a self, or ego, as the cause of suffering and the obstacle to liberation. All of the great teachers of the <413> past practiced the preliminary meditative disciplines diligently before becoming students of the vajrayana. Without this basic training in the practice of meditation, there is no ground from which to work with the vajrayana at all.

The Vajrayogini principle, as it has been experienced, understood, and transmitted by the gurus of the Karma Kagyü lineage of Tibet, to which I belong, is part of the vajrayana tradition. I feel very honored to have the opportunity to explain the Vajrayogini principle and the shrine connected with Vajrayogini practice. At the same time, I have a responsibility to the lineage, as well as to the reader, to introduce Vajrayogini properly.

#### **EGOLESSNESS AND COMPASSION**

A brief discussion of fundamental Buddhism as well as of the mahayana path is necessary here so that it will be clearly understood that Vajrayogini is not to be perceived as an external deity or force. This is sometimes rather difficult for Westerners to understand because of the Judeo-Christian belief in God. Buddhism is a nontheistic religion; there is no belief in an external savior. Nontheism is synonymous with the realization of egolessness, which is first discovered through the practices of shamatha and vipashyana meditation.

In shamatha meditation, we work with breath and posture as expressions of our state of being. By assuming a dignified and upright posture and identifying with the outgoing breath, we begin to make

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<sup>1</sup> Written to accompany a 1983 exhibit of Himalayan Buddhist art.

friends with ourselves in a fundamental sense. When thoughts arise, they are not treated as enemies, but they are included in the practice and labeled simply as "thinking." *Shamatha* in Sanskrit, or *shine* in Tibetan, means "dwelling in a state of peace." Through shamatha practice one begins to see the simplicity of one's original state of mind and to see how confusion, speed, and aggression are generated by ignoring the peacefulness of one's being. This is the first experience of egolessness, in which one realizes the transparency of fixed ideas about oneself and the illusoriness of what one thinks of as "I" or "me."

With further practice, we begin to lose the reference point of self-consciousness, and we experience the environment of practice and the world without bringing everything back to the narrow viewpoint of <414> "me." We begin to be interested in "that," rather than purely being interested in "this." The development of perception that is penetrating and precise without reference to oneself is called *vipashyana* in Sanskrit and *lhakthong* in Tibetan, which means "clear seeing." The technique of vipashyana does not differ from shamatha; rather, vipashyana grows out of the continued application of shamatha practice. The clear seeing, or insight, of vipashyana sees that there is no more of a solid existence in phenomena than there is in oneself, so that we begin to realize the egolessness of "other." We also begin to see that suffering in the world is caused by clinging to erroneous conceptions about self and phenomena. We perceive that philosophical, psychological, and religious ideas of eternity and external liberation are myths created by ego-mind. So, in vipashyana practice, egolessness is the recognition of fundamental aloneness, the nontheistic realization that we cannot look for help outside of ourselves.

Altogether, the ground of Buddhist practice is called the path of "individual liberation," which is *pratimoksha* in Sanskrit and *so sor tharpa* in Tibetan. By practicing the disciplines of shamatha and vipashyana, both in meditation and throughout one's life, we can actually liberate ourselves from personal confusion and neurosis and free ourselves from causing harm to ourselves and others. We become inspired to commit ourselves fully to this path by taking refuge in the Buddha (as the example of a human being who attained enlightenment by renouncing external help and working with his own mind), in the dharma (the teachings of egolessness that can be heard and experienced), and in the sangha (the community of practitioners who follow the path of the Buddha by practicing as he did). We realize that in this spinning world of confused existence we have had the rare good fortune to encounter the true path of liberation.

The mahayana, or "great vehicle," goes beyond the inspiration of individual liberation. On the whole, the mahayana approach is basically one of working for the benefit of others with whatever the world presents; therefore, it is an endless journey. As we embark on this journey without destination, our preconceptions begin to fall away. This experience of non-reference point, which initially could be just a momentary flash in one's mind, is the first glimpse of shunyata. *Shunya* means "empty," and *ta* makes it "emptiness." According to tradition, shunyata is empty of "I" and empty of "other"; it is absolutely empty. This experience of emptiness is realizing that there is no "I" as actor, no action, and no "other" to be acted upon. <415>

Shunyata is not the nihilistic idea of nothingness, or voidness. It is the complete absence of grasping and fixation—the complete egolessness of subject and object. It is therefore the absence of separation between self and other.

The experience of shunyata provides tremendous room and tremendous vision. There is room because we see that there is no obstacle to going out, to expanding. And there is vision because there is no separation between oneself and one's experience. We can perceive things clearly, as they are,

without filters of any kind. This unbiased perception is called *prajna*, or "discriminating awareness." *Prajna* is the sharpness of the perception of *shunyata* and the knowledge that comes from that perception.

In fact, *prajna* literally means "superior knowledge" or "best knowledge." The highest knowledge that one can have is the knowledge of egoless insight, which begins as the experience of *vipashyana* and matures in the *mahayana* into *prajna*. The discriminating awareness of *prajna* sees that "I" and "other" are not separate and, therefore, that the enlightenment of oneself and the enlightenment of others cannot be separated.

In this way, the perception of *shunyata* makes us altogether more wakeful and compassionate. We feel immense interest in others and immense caring for others, whose suffering is not different from our own. This is the beginning of the *mahayana* practice of exchanging oneself for others.

The notion of exchange means giving whatever assistance is needed; we extend our kindness, sanity, and love to other people. In exchange, we are willing to take on others' pain, confusion, and hypocrisy. We are willing to take the blame for any problems that might come up—not because we wish to be martyrs, but because we feel that there is an infinite reservoir of goodness and sanity to share. At the *mahayana* level, egolessness is expanded into the path of selfless action, which goes completely beyond ego-clinging. It is this surrendering of ego, which we shall discuss later, that makes it possible to enter the *vajrayana* path.

## VAJRA NATURE AND THE YIDAM PRINCIPLE

When we let go of grasping and fixation completely, we are able to rest in the intrinsic goodness of our minds, and we regard whatever discursive thoughts that arise—passion, aggression, delusion, or any conflicting emotions—as merely ripples in the pond of mind. Out of that, we begin to realize that there is a greater vision beyond grasping and fixation. That vision is very firm and definite. It is not definite in the style of ego, but it is like the sun, which shines all the time. When we fly in an airplane above the clouds, we realize that the sun is always shining even when it is cloudy and rainy below. In the same way, when we cease to hold on to our identity, our ego, we begin to see that the nonexistence of ego is a powerful, real, and indestructible state of being. We realize that, like the sun, it is a continuous situation which does not wax or wane.

This state of being is called *vajra* nature. *Vajra*, or *dorje* in Tibetan, means "indestructible," or "having the qualities of a diamond." *Vajra* nature is the tough, immovable quality of egolessness, which is the basis for the *vajrayana* path. The term *vajrayana* itself means "vehicle of indestructibility"—the "vajra vehicle." The *vajrayana* is also called the *tantrayana*, or "tantric vehicle." *Tantra*, or *gyu* in Tibetan, means "continuity" or "thread." *Vajra* nature is the continuity of egolessness, or wakefulness, which, like the sun, is brilliant and all-pervasive.

The deities of the *vajrayana* are embodiments of *vajra* nature. In particular, the deities called *yidams* are important for the practice of *vajrayana*. The best translation of *yidam* that I have found is "personal deity." Actually, *yidam* is a shortened form of the phrase *yi kyi tamtsik*, which means "sacred bondage of one's mind." *Yi* means "mind," *kyi* means "of," and *tamtsik* means "sacred word" or "sacred bondage." *Tamtsik*, which in Sanskrit is *samaya*, will become important in a later discussion of the sacred commitments of the *vajrayana*. *Mind* here refers to *vajra* nature, the basic sanity and wakefulness of one's being, freed from ego-clinging. The *yidam* is the manifestation of this enlightened mind; it is the *yidam* who connects or binds the practitioner to the enlightened sanity

within himself. So, according to the tantric understanding, the yidam is a nontheistic deity who embodies one's innate vajra nature, rather than any form of external help.

There are many thousands of tantric deities, but in the Karma Kagyü lineage, Vajrayogini is a particularly important yidam. When a student has completed the preliminary vajrayana practices, called the ngondro, he receives abhisheka, or empowerment, to begin yidam practice, in which he identifies with a personal deity as the embodiment of his innate wakefulness, or vajra nature. In the Karma Kagyü tradition, Vajrayogini <417> is the first yidam given to a student. In order to understand the Vajrayogini principle in any depth, a discussion of the stages of vajrayana practice through which a student is introduced to the yidam is necessary.

**DEVOTION** [... ...]

**NGÖNDRO** [... ...]

**SACRED OUTLOOK** [... ...]

**THE FIVE BUDDHA FAMILIES** [... ...]

**ABHISHEKA** [... ...]

**THE VAJRAYOGINI SADHANA IN THE KARMA KAMTSANG LINEAGE** [... ...]

**THE CEREMONY OF ABHISHEKA** [... ...]

**SAMAYA** [... ...]

**COEMERGENT WISDOM** [... ...]

**VISUALIZATION** [... ...]

**THE VAJRAYOGINI PRINCIPLE AND ITS ICONOGRAPHY** [... ...]

**CONCLUSION** [... ...]