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Deep Dive *into* Vajra Mind

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CONTENTS

The Myths, Challenges, and Rewards of Tantra

A forum on Tantra with Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, Anne C. Klein, and Larry Mermelstein, originally printed in *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly*, a Lion's Roar publication.

BUDDHADHARMA: Tantra is by its nature exotic and esoteric, so it can cause puzzlement or even disdain. How do you think tantra, Vajrayana, is perceived today?

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: In the world I'm most familiar with, academia, there's a lot of interest in tantra. There's interest in assimilating it to other themes in religious studies. For example, because of its investigation of mind states it becomes associated with different kinds of Western psychological analysis. It is also associated with "the transgressive," the encouragement to transgress certain societal norms. Transgressive is about going against what people think is correct, about being a little bit "in your face."

But while scholars like to talk about tantra as transgressive, in my view that misses how tantra actually functions for its Buddhist practitioners. It kind of skews the conversation into alleys and byways that don't really take into account the long history of how tantric ideas and practices have been assimilated very gradually and very thoughtfully—first in India, but particularly in Tibet—into an organized, graded path that leads to the very same realization that is central to all of Buddhism. Vajrayana is not predicated purely upon being radical and iconoclastic.

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: Absolutely. The details of what Vajrayana means and how it works will come across in time as we begin to share more and see more teachers. It would be difficult to clarify everything in a short period of time. Many great Vajrayana masters traveled to America, such as His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa, His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the venerable Kalu Rinpoche, His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche. The very venerable Trungpa Rinpoche took North America as his seat and set a very good ground. Nevertheless, we can see how acculturating people to tantra is necessarily a long process.

BUDDHADHARMA: Practicing tantra requires a strong community context and careful training. How are we doing in creating Vajrayana communities in a context that's pretty different from the one in which Vajrayana flourished for a thousand years?

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: People become attracted to Vajrayana largely because of its teachers—because of their charisma, and their palpable compassion. The sparkling presentations of the great teachers are like beacons drawing people to them. You want to just be with the teacher, to hang out with them and hear what they teach, and ultimately to practice what they advise once the honeymoon has passed. There's a process, which is not always so easy, of actually understanding and appreciating and benefiting from the practices.

One of the first obstacles is that ritual is not prevalent in many parts of the modern West. So a core challenge for many people is to be able to work with ritual—to be able to experience it as a way to hold realization that one can gradually enter into and allow to seep into oneself, rather than experiencing it as a superficial traditional requirement.

Often people see ritual as a whole bunch of rules and forms. The obsessive mind kicks in and it becomes a pursuit: How do you do this? How do you do that? Certainly one tries to do things correctly, but when that dominates, the quality of the ritual as a means of teaching can fade away.

LARRY MERMELSTEIN: Yes, this has been a difficulty for many people. I'd say we're doing the best we can, and one of the things we can benefit from is how many translator–practitioners we have

to support that process. In time, many if not most people find a good relationship with ritual, but we should always be attuned to helping them along.

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: Another challenge in the West is that steps have to be taken to really include the body in practice. It's possible to be reciting a mantra and imagining you are a deity but your body is completely checked out and not resonating with what's going on. It's all in the head. A certain amount of training is necessary just to help people be in their body.

LARRY MERMELSTEIN: I agree. I now appreciate how little awareness I generally have about my body. How grounded am I really? Many practitioners are becoming more appreciative of that as we age. The body starts not working so well, and that's been a wonderful teaching for me. I was about fifty before I actually began to do anything about it, because the body was really falling apart.

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: Also, what we usually translate as "visualization" is something that is much broader than that word implies. It does a great disservice to what one is actually doing.

BUDDHADHARMA: The word "visualization" is very eye-sense oriented.

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: Yes. It's also very subject–object oriented. Our Western notion of visualization conjures up something like watching a movie, or watching TV. In the traditional cultures in which tantra arose, you never saw anything that wasn't alive in front of you. Seeing has a certain richness and aliveness and freshness in that kind of culture. So, embodying a deity is not just done with the eyes, it's done with the whole organism. Often people say, "I can't visualize," or "I can't see it clearly." We can also forget the power of the mantra itself to evoke the deity and her world, and the extent to which one needs to get out of the way and allow it to do that. Too often we stand in the way, and worry and obsess. It becomes a real interference with practice.

LARRY MERMELSTEIN: Making the ritual practice relevant and workable requires training, and probably a little more for Westerners, which is one of the jobs that our translation group takes on, in addition to simply translating. We try to help people engage with the texts and the methods in a way that allows it to become a natural extension of their prior Buddhist practice, rather than a bunch of new bells and whistles.

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: Yes. That's good. I also think it's very important to bring dharma understanding to the practice you know, so that one really understands absolute and relative truth

and how the practice of tantra is showing you their union. That does not come automatically, so at the very least some basic Madhyamaka helps a lot.

BUDDHADHARMA: As Rinpoche was pointing out earlier, the philosophical tradition provides the underpinning for the ritual.

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: Exactly.

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: I work with a lot of students in America and I agree with Anne and Larry that there need to be progressive stages of training in the view of meditation, bringing it to one's experience, and then manifesting that in one's action. I would say, though, that the students generally are doing pretty well. Of course, the path is a path. There is a quotation from Maitreya's teaching that the path at the beginning is mostly impure with lots of mistakes; in the middle, the path is half and half; toward the end, it is more pure and perfect. That's what everybody goes through. Even in one sitting session. We start out very challenged, in the middle we calm down a little bit, and toward the end when we have to leave for work, we actually start to enjoy it. [Laughter]

BUDDHADHARMA: Why can't we just reverse the order, Rinpoche?

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: I was actually hoping we could create a machine to do that [laughter]. But it seems that progressive training in the three yanas is how it has always been done. And I think in all of our sanghas we have been trying to do that.

LARRY MERMELSTEIN: We are part of a very big, grand experiment of bringing an enormous cultural infusion of incredible wisdom that has come to the West from Tibet. We have rapid communications and the internet connects us across the globe, but the rate of transmission of the dharma has a kind of natural rate. We are very busy taking advantage of how much has been provided by teachers coming to the West, and we're proceeding slowly from some aerial perspective. Or perhaps we're moving quite quickly. Only future generations will be able to judge how we've done. It's hard for us to see that since we are in the middle of the experiment. Overall, though, the students seem to be finding the teachings very useful and relevant and are connecting with them slowly but surely. Also, gradually, we're beginning to understand the view better and getting a better feel for the practice, and we're finding a way to mix them.

BUDDHADHARMA: I have at times suffered from the syndrome of trying to be a cognitive superstar in working with these practices, rather than having a relationship with them that engaged my whole body and mind, a more intuitive kind of knowing.

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: Rinpoche said it all when he said a path is a path. And part of the path for many of us may be transcending the cognitive superstar syndrome. Because we're so used to cognitive learning; we feel that if we can just get it intellectually, we'll have it. On one of the very first visits that His Holiness the Dalai Lama made, he came to the University of Virginia and was sitting in Jeffrey Hopkins' basement, which had been made into a temple. He sat on the floor. There were only about fifty people there, and he said that if you've been practicing for about five years and instead of getting angry ten times a day you only get angry seven or eight times a day, you should really understand that you've made progress.

I often recall that. It's a very compassionate teaching. It helps people to understand the extent of the path—what a big job it is even to reduce your anger by 20 percent. Too often we idealize things. We suddenly feel we've changed radically and then are devastated when we see the old habits creep in again, as of course they will. The path is a path. It unfolds and it's important to savor and appreciate that what may seem like a small thing is actually quite an important achievement.

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: Patience is very important, especially in this time when instant gratification is expected. People think they must achieve something right away, and that becomes an obstacle.

BUDDHADHARMA: Since realization is self-existing, it is available on the spot. Yet the path is so very long. How do you reconcile that?

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: By not trying to reconcile that. [Laughter]

BUDDHADHARMA: That's a profound answer. Thank you.

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: You posed a good question, and I should have a good answer, but I don't. I'm sorry. [Laughter]

BUDDHADHARMA: I thought not reconciling the instantaneous path and the long, gradual path was the answer.

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: No. I retract that answer.

BUDDHADHARMA: Shall we try again?

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: It is true that the Vajrayana teaches about sudden awakening, but all of those teachings are based on the idea that our mind is primordially awake, already awake. So, we discover that. That's very different from instant gratification.

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: As I contemplate the dichotomy of all the challenges we have that can obstruct us, and the fact that in terms of treading the path we're probably doing pretty well and are very well served, I am reminded of something I just read from Longchenpa: the fact of primordial buddhanature does not contradict the fact that there's much to purify.

LARRY MERMELSTEIN: Trungpa Rinpoche said, "I have achieved the bhumi of patience due to the kindness of my students."

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: Wonderful!

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: Another of the challenges is that we're householders, by and large. There are constraints on the amount of time we have to practice. How much time is needed? Will a few short, intense retreats ever add up to what people were able to do in Tibet? That's a huge question.

LARRY MERMELSTEIN: Indeed, the cultural context is quite different. And sometimes people have expectations about what kind of context is needed. For example, because of the importance of the guru–student relationship in Vajrayana, some students think they should be hanging out with their gurus. Yet we have something that is in a way parallel to that. We have so many books now that have been translated and commented on. These translations are careful and well researched. And the teachings, including video,

audio, and written transcriptions of thousands of talks by various teachers—many have been compiled into books and manuals of instruction. Students in America today have an incredible wealth of ways of contemplating and revisiting the instructions they received orally. Add to that the great support of the many sanghas in the West who feel they are treading the path together. While there are challenges, there are many riches that generations of students to come can be thankful for.

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: I would like to add that being in the room with my teacher, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, and receiving teachings, or even just sitting there with him, is very powerful. Feeling connected with him in that way is vital, and an experience that goes beyond reading his books. Both are very important.

BUDDHADHARMA: The transmission quality is essential to Vajrayana.

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: It certainly is for me.

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: I don't think I would have read any Buddhist books if not for the presence of my teachers, and the ability or the opportunity to discuss that with them. The books can be kind of tough, even in English. There's something about the

luminous presence of the teacher. Even just basking in the inspiration that they've left me with as I encounter the words I'm reading is crucial.

BUDDHADHARMA: Anne mentioned the problem of finding enough time and the challenges of being householder yogis. How can tantra be made to work in this world today?

LARRY MERMELSTEIN: I firmly believe that tantric practice is workable in the world we live in. If the Vajrayana actually began with King Indrabuti supplicating the Buddha for teachings that would work for him as a king, who was not willing or able to give up his worldliness and responsibilities, by definition that means the Vajrayana teachings ultimately are meant for householders.

Our world is moving a lot faster than it probably was back in those days and so, yes, the stresses and complexities seem to be much greater than centuries ago. But so what? The very choicelessness of it is good for us. We have to do everything we can to incorporate the teachings on a continual basis in our lives, knowing full well that many of us may not have a lot of time for intense long retreat—though at times we might have some semblance of that. The teachings are geared to being applicable in our lives, as they are. It's extremely workable. We have thousands of people

currently engaged in that experiment in the West. Many of us, as Rinpoche was saying earlier, do experience the frustration of wanting it to be better, but that is the essence of path.

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE: The Buddha's response to King Indrabuti's request clearly indicates that the tantric path is meant primarily for lay practitioners. In many of the mahasiddha stories, their families also begin to thoroughly engage in a Vajrayana practice. They manifest in many walks of life: as a carpenter, bartender, or farmer like Marpa. Khenpo Rinpoche has taught that it is primarily a yogi tradition. Of course we can be monastic yogis, but in many ways these methods are more suitable for lay practitioners, lay yogis and yoginis.

ANNE CAROLYN KLEIN: Even if we feel that tantra is a workable path for householder yogis and yoginis, we still need to work with time management. It helps if we can constantly reflect on what is meaningful in life, and how precious time is. That is an extremely significant ongoing support for practice. It refreshes us. In the end almost any amount of practice is going to be beneficial. It's not all or nothing. There's a black-and-white thinking that can intrude. If I can't be the next Milarepa, why bother? It's always worthwhile to do what is possible and we need to get over the superstar, overachiever syndrome.

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Journey to Awakening

The spiritual path is like any journey we take into uncharted territory—we need a map, a vehicle, and a guide to reach our destination. Judy Lief takes us on the three-yana journey of Vajrayana Buddhism.

Maps

I have always been fascinated by maps. In grade school, when we were introduced to map reading and map making, it seemed so magical that the world and its complexity could be represented by pictures and diagrams on a simple sheet of paper. It was amazing that if you followed the directions on the map you would actually be able to get somewhere, even if you had never been there before. It got even better when I discovered that I could send off a cereal-box coupon and receive in the mail a genuine pirate's map leading to a chest of buried treasure. These sepia maps, ancient looking and burned on the edges, led me to believe that I could follow such a map to the point where "X marks the spot."

There are many kinds of maps. We create internal maps without even being aware of doing so, mapping our physical, emotional, and mental realities. By means of a map, you can find your way back to where you started without getting lost. A map can lead you to someplace new or give your friends a way to find you. Maps give us directions on how to proceed. They provide a feeling of security and are a defense against bewilderment and disorientation. It is a relief to be able to look at a map and see where you are. It is a relief to know that you are somewhere specific, that you came from somewhere and that there is somewhere to go.

Journeys

Journeys are challenging. We leave our familiar home and enter new territory. How do we know what to do and where to go? Embarking on a spiritual journey is like this. The new spiritual terrain can seem to be a kind of terra incognita, scary and possibly overrun by monsters. We are afraid we might get lost and not be able to find our way forward or back. We are on a treasure hunt, but we don't know where to look. If we have the right map, we might be able to find that buried treasure, even if it has been underground for many years.

On the spiritual journey, it is possible to get stuck and not really go anywhere. It is also possible to be swept along so rapidly that we lose our bearings. If we have no map, we might drift about aimlessly and go round in circles. But if our trip is overly scripted,

there will be no room for personal discoveries. It would be like signing up for a package tour in which every point of interest has been spelled out in advance. So we need the right kind of map, one that gives us a sense of direction and an overview of where we are going but also leaves room for us to explore. Along with a general map of the territory, we need a good guide for our journey who can point the way. This guide should have explored the region so thoroughly that he or she no longer needs an external map. Their familiarity with the terrain is so thorough that they have developed a kind of internal map, like an inner instinctual compass. But although they no longer need a map themselves, such guides recognize the value of maps for newcomers, as well as the limitations of relying on maps.

On my own journey, I have been fortunate to encounter both a guide and a map. In my case, the guide is the late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the terrain is Vajrayana Buddhism, and the map is the teachings on the stages of the path.

Vehicles

In the Vajrayana tradition, one's journey can be described in terms of three main vehicles, or yanas. The first is the path of individual liberation, the second is the Mahayana path of greater openness and compassion, and the third is the Vajrayana path of indestructible wakefulness. Each yana has its own integrity and completeness, and at the same time they form a unified system. Although

any one of the three can be studied and practiced separately, the path of individual liberation, Mahayana, and Vajrayana are in fact expressions of a single path.

The dynamic nature of this model is exemplified by the use of the term yana, vehicle, rather than more static terms such as steps or stages. When you get into a vehicle, you definitely expect it to move along and carry you forward. Likewise, in the three-yana journey you are continually moving forward. There is an organic quality to the three-yana progression, in the sense that with a little care each experience on the spiritual path naturally evolves and grows. At the same time, as you progress along the path, you do not drop the previous yana as you move on to the next one.

Vajrayana teachers also liken the three yanas to building a house. Here, the yana of individual liberation provides the foundation, the connection with the Earth. There is no way to build a solid house with- out a foundation—it is what you build first, and it is the ballast or support for the whole structure. But a foundation alone is not a house; you need walls and windows and doors. This is like the Mahayana, for it provides the possibility of hospitality and a means of communication and exchange with the world. And finally, of course, you need a roof. You need shelter and protection and the kind of adornment that brings the whole picture together. That roof is the Vajrayana.

This straightforward and systematic guide for practitioners is a great benefit of the Tibetan tradition. The set of teachings by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, titled *The Profound Treasury of the Ocean of Dharma*, presents the three-yana teachings as the framework for deepening and refining the study and practice of the dharma. Trungpa Rinpoche placed great emphasis on these teachings and presented them in many individual talks and in public seminars. He came back to this topic again and again, and most notably, he used the three yanas as the structure for every one of the three-month-long Vajradhatu Seminaries he led for his most senior students. *The Profound Treasury* presents these teachings to the public for the first time.

The Yana of Individual Liberation

Before you can figure out the map of dharma, you first have to know where you are. The yana of individual liberation is like the spot on the map that says "You are here." It is where you begin. This is the yana that introduces the fundamental principles and practices of the Buddhist tradition. These key insights are the foundation of the Buddhist path altogether and the underpinning of the subsequent two yanas.

View

In the path of individual liberation, you examine your view of yourself, your actions, and the world around you. You contemplate the nature of your own identity and discover that your

seemingly solid self is in fact not all that solid. You see that sensations and experiences arise and fall continually, but if you try to find what holds them all together, you come up empty-handed. And as your own solidity begins to be questionable, you also begin to have doubts about the so-called solid world outside. There is a softening of the pain of alienation and the split between I and other.

In this yana, you also look more deeply into your actions and habits and their consequences. You examine the attitudes and actions that have brought you up to this point and take a hard look at where they will inevitably lead you in the future. You gain respect for how small actions can have big effects. By looking closely into these patterns, you can distinguish where and why you are stuck and where and how there might be openings for change.

This is the yana of personal responsibility. You begin to see your own role in creating the thought habits and emotional tangles that entrap you. You realize how much of what seems to be out there or coming at you is your own projections bouncing back at you. This yana has a quality of purity and no nonsense, which can be summed up by the Buddha's teaching on the four noble truths: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to liberation. The reality of suffering, and the many subtle expressions of suffering underlying our ordinary experiences of pain and pleasure, is not that easy to understand or accept. It is like we are addicted to

dysfunctional living, so we keep telling ourselves it can't really be all that bad. But maybe it is that bad, and once we take an interest in that possibility, we are beginning to move along. We are awakening our inquisitiveness. That leads us to explore what might be causing our suffering, and we discover the destructive power of ignorance and grasping. This is the truth of the cause of suffering.

The brilliance of this teaching is that right away it gives you something to work with. Instead of dreaming of how things might be or should be, you begin simply with what is right in front of you. You begin to make a transition from feeling victimized: you see that since you are actually responsible for your situation, you yourself can change it. So instead of despairing that "you made your bed, now lie in it," it is more like "you made your bed, so you can unmake it as well." This is the third noble truth—cessation, the possibility of freedom. And finally, with great practicality, the Buddha gave detailed instructions on how to move forward. This is the path, the fourth noble truth.

Meditation

Like the view of path of individual liberation, which is the foundation for the entire path, the meditation practices of this yana continue right through the Mahayana and Vajrayana. The central practices are twofold, *shamatha* and *vipashyana*—mindfulness and awareness.

Basically, shamatha is the practice of taming the mind; it is a stilling and settling of the mind. Vipashyana means "clear seeing," and it has two aspects. There is an inquisitive, investigative component, and also a direct perceptual component that comes when the mind relaxes and opens out. Both shamatha and vipashyana are ways of gaining sophistication about the working of your own mind and the play of thoughts and emotions. As a result, you are less captured by your opinions and judgments and not so easily overwhelmed by the intensities of your emotions. There is a quality of kindness and self-acceptance.

Action

The yana of individual liberation is all about slowing down and simplifying. There is a paring down of experience at all levels, with fewer distractions, fewer thoughts, less drama, fewer entanglements. When you act simply, with mindfulness, your actions have more power. You speak when something needs to be said, and you act when action is needed. You are learning how to be, and you manifest the power of simple genuine presence.

In the yana of individual liberation, there is also a quality of restraint. You practice the discipline of refraining from harmful actions. Because you are less caught in speediness of mind, you can recognize the arising of impulsive, negative action and nip it in the bud.

The view, practice, and action of the path of individual liberation set you on the path of dharma. They help you build the mental, emotional, and meditative health you need to grow in your dharmic understanding and realization. They prepare you well for the journey.

Mahayana: The Bodhisattva Path of Wisdom and Compassion

The Mahayana is a natural outgrowth of the yana of individual liberation. It is the simplifying and paring down of the path of individual liberation that makes the expansiveness of Mahayana possible. Doing the hard work of investigating your own nature and your preconceptions about the world changes you in significant ways. You become more self-accepting, gentler, more real and genuine. When you have become a better friend to yourself, you are ready to be a better friend to others.

View

In the Mahayana you see yourself as inextricably connected with all other beings, and because of that your individual path expands and broadens. Your training in the yana of individual liberation has brought you to the point where you sense the underlying inclination of all beings to awaken, and you gain more confidence in your own potential. At the same time, you recognize that focusing on your own development is not enough. You cannot be free from suffering if you know that others around you are still suffering.

So the awareness you have cultivated through sitting practice makes it hard to ignore the suffering of others, and it gives birth to greater empathy and compassion. Likewise, the silence and stillness cultivated in your shamatha practice gives birth to a sense of vastness, openness, and continual expansion. This wide-open quality, since it is free of deception or any boundaries, concepts, or limits, is referred to as emptiness, or *shunyata*.

Meditation

The practice of sitting meditation continues to be important in the Mahayana. But in addition to the cultivation of mindfulness and awareness, there is an emphasis on the cultivation of the heart and on meditation in action.

The term "meditation" usually refers to more formless practices, such as placing attention on the breathing process. But once the mind is somewhat settled, you can engage in a variety of contemplative exercises as a mindful way of reflecting on a particular subject. This kind of reflection could be about obstacles you need to overcome or it could be about qualities you aspire to cultivate.

In one traditional contemplation, you contemplate the qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, known as the four immeasurables. This is not done in a dry or abstract way; you aspire to tap in to the limitless energy of each of these benevolent emotions and direct it outward to beings near

and far. So at one and the same time, you are deepen- ing your understanding of these four qualities and you are evoking them on the spot.

Perhaps the most well-known Mahayana practice is that of tonglen, sending and taking. This practice is also referred to as exchanging yourself for others. It is a radical reversal of the habit of putting oneself before others; in this practice, others come first. When others are experiencing difficulty or pain, you breathe that in; when joy or confidence arises within, you breathe that out to benefit others. You practice tonglen in relation to your own mental- emotional process and you practice this in relation to others, starting with those closest to you and extending from there. Tonglen practice challenges our sense of territory, limits, and boundaries; it confronts us with the limits of our thoughts, and the limits of our love and compassion for ourselves and other beings.

In the Mahayana, the practice of tonglen is complemented by the ongoing practice of bringing wisdom and compassion into our ordinary, everyday encounters. This is called meditation in action. Formal practices are like basic training, but the test of that training is how it manifests in your daily life. It is easy to be compassionate in theory, but putting it into practice is not so easy. So along with tonglen practice, you can work with a set of Mahayana slogans called *lojong* (mind training) that serve as pointed

reminders to continue the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion in the midst of daily life. These powerful little slogans will not let you off the hook.

Although such Mahayana practices as tonglen have become popular, Mahayana wisdom practices are equally important. In the Madhyamaka, or middle way approach, you work with a sophisticated system of logical reasonings to deconstruct your ego-clinging and fixed views about reality. These cut off any escape from immediate experience and leave you groundless, in a kind of no-man's-land. Although this might sound desolate or devastating, it is simply the pain of emergence from the constraints of our fear and ego-clinging.

A related practice is the systematic contemplation of the different aspects of emptiness. Once again, you are using reasoning mind to realize the nonconceptual. You do so with such diligence, putting so much energy and fuel into the project, that eventually the struggling conceptual mind simply burns itself out.

Action

In the yana of individual liberation you cultivated the discipline of restraint, of refraining from harmful actions. On that basis you can afford to extend yourself. In the Mahayana, your discipline is not

only to limit harmful actions but to increase activities that are of benefit to yourself and others. You are challenged to push beyond your comfort zone and be willing to engage fully with the world. The notion of virtuous action in the Mahayana has great depth. Six fundamental principles serve as guidelines: generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and knowledge. These are known as the six transcendent perfections, or *paramitas*. There is constant interplay among these six and a variety of checks and balances. And underlying all of them is the basic Mahayana principle of putting others before yourself.

There is a subtlety in the approach to action in the Mahayana. If you are attached to the idea of being virtuous, if you are fixated on results, if you want a pat on the back, it is no longer real virtue. You may accomplish a certain level of benefit, but if your actions are less tainted by those kinds of concerns, you can accomplish much more. Without that kind of residue, there is a lightness and humor in your actions, as well as great depth and power.

Vajrayana: The Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness

The third and final yana is the Vajrayana, which is also known as tantra. It is the natural fruition of the groundwork laid by the path of individual liberation, and the expansion of the path in the Mahayana. In the three-yana system, the Vajrayana is the fruition, the endpoint, yet it is also a continuation of what has come before.

The Vajrayana does not leave the path of individual liberation and the Mahayana behind; it incorporates the views and practices of the previous two yanas and builds on them.

You gather your energy in the yana of individual liberation and extend out in the Mahayana. In the Vajrayana you dive into reality completely. When you dive in without hesitation, the world is seen as sacred, and your ordinary vision is transformed into sacred outlook. At this point you are already steeped in the view and practices of the buddhadharma, so the time has come to fully manifest what you have learned. It is the Vajrayana that shows you how to do that, and so it is known as the yana of skillful means.

View

In the Vajrayana your view is expansive. It is as if you have been trudging along a mountain trail for miles and miles and finally reach the top, where at long last you have a chance to see the entire panorama. You experience your ordinary world in a fresh way and the most mundane experiences are seen to be infused with sacredness. The Vajrayana view is nontheistic, yet you experience this sacred world as filled with deities, filled with teachers and teaching, filled with symbolism. In the Vajrayan you being to touch in to a realm of boundless space that is both luminous and empty, accommodating birth and death, samsara and nirvana, all phenomena.

Meditation

Vajrayana practices can be divided into those with form and those that are more formless. Naturally, the foundation for embarking on these advanced practices is your training in shamatha and vipashyana, and in the Mahayana mind training and compassion practices.

Visualization practices make use of the mind's natural tendency to form pictures. In visualization practice you create an image in your mind of a deity, and you evoke the wisdom and power of that deity, identifying the deity with those qualities in your own nature. Visualization practices are done in the context of liturgies, or *sadhanas*, that include meditation, the recitation of mantras, and ritual gestures, or *mudras*. In tantra, there are many deities representing different types of realization. For instance, Avalokiteshvara represents compassion and Manjushri represents wisdom. However, it is important to understand that these deities are unlike more well-known theistic concepts, such as a creator God. Tantric deities are luminous yet empty, and they arise and dissolve out of emptiness in the process of visualization. They embody our own enlightened nature.

Vajrayana formless practice is the epitome of simplicity and relaxation. This experience is sometimes referred to as being like an old dog. There is a carefree, confident, and nonstriving approach

to meditation and a letting go of pretense. Trungpa Rinpoche talked about this as being content to be the lowest of the low. There is an exhaustion of egoic ambition.

Vajrayana practices are meant to be transmitted directly by an accomplished master to students who are well-trained and prepared to enter into them fully. They are not taken up casually. The personal relationship between teacher and student is paramount. The meeting of the dedication of the teacher and the devotion of the students provides the essential spark for Vajrayana practices to take root.

Action

Vajrayana action, like that of the previous yanas, is based on wisdom and compassion. It has its root in mindfulness and awareness. But at this level, compassionate activity becomes more radical, even wrathful, and totally uncompromising. Such action is described as having four forms or energies: pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, and destroying. There is a no-nonsense approach to obstacles, and a determination to clear away fearlessly anything that threatens to undermine one's progress on the path to the realization of the sacred, wakeful nature of reality.

In the Vajrayana we recognize that physical gestures, sounds and utterances, and thoughts are all gateways to awakening and should be worked with and respected. We see that all aspects of

our experience, and the environment as a whole, are workable on the path to enlightenment. The Vajrayana is a complete world. Once you enter it, every action becomes a message of the teaching. There is no boundary and nowhere to hide.

Treasure

The three-yana journey I have been describing is not a linear journey. You repeatedly circle back to the beginning and start over again. Each time you think you have reached a break- through, you find that there is further to go, and it becomes clear that an accomplishment at one level can become an obstacle at the next.

However, you keep going, drawn by the lure of the treasure, the promise of awakening, the yearning for freedom. If you follow the map with enough persistence, maybe you will find it. There it will be: X marks the spot. Or maybe the search itself is the treasure. Maybe you have been carrying the treasure with you all along.
A key aspect of Mahayana practice is that you continually bring compassion and wisdom into balance. There is no real wisdom without compassion, and no real compassion without wisdom. Fundamentally the two are inseparable, but it is possible to lose that balance, so it must continually be restored.

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Oh Tara, Protect Us

Vajrayana practitioners supplicate deities and buddhas to help clear obstacles on the path. In this teaching, Thubten Chodron comments on a prayer to the *buddha* Tara to protect us from the eight dangers.

Tara is one of the most beloved buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism. Her name means "the liberator." She liberates us from ignorance, which is the root of cyclic existence, and from self-centered thought, which impedes us from attaining the full awakening of a buddha. She also liberates us from the eight dangers, each of which has an outer and inner aspect: the lion of arrogance, elephant of ignorance, fire of anger, snake of jealousy, thieves of wrong views, chain of miserliness, flood of attachment, and carnivorous demon of doubt.

How does Tara liberate and protect us from danger? It is not by swooping down and carrying us away to heaven or by making a problematic situation magically disappear. Enlightened beings cannot take our defilements away, like pulling a thorn from our foot. Nor can they give us their realizations, like pouring water into an empty bowl. The fundamental way Tara—or any other buddha—benefits sentient beings is by teaching us the dharma

and inspiring us to investigate its meaning so we reach a correct understanding. She then guides us in meditation practice so we generate transformative realizations.

Through practicing what we learn, we generate the wisdom that realizes emptiness, and through meditating on emptiness, we cleanse our minds of defilements and actualize the cessation of suffering.

When requesting Tara to free us, we are actually calling upon our inner Tara—the seeds of our own wisdom and compassion. As we gradually cultivate these qualities, they protect us from the damage inflicted by the disturbing emotions.

Tara liberates us by embodying all the realizations of the path. Visualizing her emerald-green form made of light, we contemplate the path and internalize its meaning, as each aspect of her form represents an aspect of the path to awakening. Tara also liberates us by being a role model. Formerly a princess who was told to pray to be reborn as a man, she attained full awakening in a woman's body, encouraging us to overcome whatever prejudice, discrimination, or discouragement we may encounter.

The following verses requesting Tara to protect us from the eight dangers are from "A Crown Ornament for the Wise," a hymn to Tara composed by Gyalwa Gendun Drubpa, the First Dalai Lama.

Dwelling in the mountains of wrong views of selfhood,
Puffed up with holding itself superior,
It claws other beings with contempt:
The lion of arrogance—please protect us from this danger!

Just as lions strut in mountainous areas, our arrogance dwells in wrong views concerning the nature of the "I" or "self." Although the "I" is dependent, ignorance apprehends it as existing independent of all other factors. This wrong view is the root of our suffering in cyclic existence.

Holding an unrealistic view of how we exist, we then compare ourselves with others, becoming puffed up over those whom we deem inferior, jealous of those we consider superior, and competitive with equals. Our arrogance begets contempt, which, like a lion's claws, causes harm. These harmful actions perpetuate our rebirth in unfortunate states of existence. Meanwhile, our arrogance prevents us from recognizing our predicament in cyclic existence.

The wisdom that realizes the emptiness of inherent existence is the ultimate antidote to all eight inner dangers, for it sees the true nature of the self—that it is empty of independent or inherent existence. However, since this realization takes time to generate and is difficult to gain, we use other, easier antidotes in the

meantime. These temporary antidotes correspond to each particular affliction. In the case of arrogance, we contemplate a difficult topic, such as the twelve sources or eighteen elements, which is essential to understand but difficult to comprehend. Recognizing how limited our current understanding is makes us less arrogant.

Another antidote is to reflect that everything we know and every talent and ability we have comes from the kindness of others. People taught and coached us; they encouraged us in all areas. Seeing this, how can we be arrogant, thinking we are so special?

Bowing to the three jewels further helps counteract arrogance. While bowing, we contemplate the qualities of the three jewels so respect and admiration grow in our minds. Physically lying on the ground with our face on the floor induces humility and the relinquishing of ego, making us receptive students. Our heart becomes lighter; we are able to laugh at our foibles, and we are no longer fearful of others "finding us out."

> Untamed by the sharp hooks of mindfulness and introspective awareness,
> Dulled by the maddening liquor of sensual pleasures,
> It enters wrong paths and shows its harmful tusks:
> The elephant of ignorance—protect us from this danger!

Powerful and out of control, a mad elephant terrorizes all in its path. Similarly, uncontrolled emotions, which stem from ignorance, lead to a chaotic life that lacks clear priorities. Intoxicated by ignorant attachment to sense pleasures, we do whatever is necessary to procure what we seek. Ignorance takes us down wrong paths that lead only to confusion and suffering.

When petitioning Tara for protection, we call forth our own powers of mindfulness and introspective awareness, two active mental factors that perform special functions in the mind. Like a tamer who knows how to subdue a wild elephant and harness its energy for constructive purposes, these mental factors lead us to ethical behavior and meditative concentration. The Sanskrit word that is translated as "mindfulness" can also be translated as "remember" or "memory." So with respect to ethical conduct, mindfulness remembers our precepts and holds our values, and introspective awareness enables us to see if we are living within them. In the context of meditation, mindfulness is what focuses on the object of meditation and holds it so it is not forgotten, and introspective awareness is like a spy—a corner of our mind that investigates whether distraction, dullness, or excitement has set in, interfering with our meditation.

> Driven by the wind of inappropriate attention,
> Billowing forth swirling smoke—clouds of misconduct,
> It has the power to burn down forests of goodness:
> The fire of anger—protect us from this danger!

Like a raging fire, anger begins with a tiny spark. Fueled by the wind of inappropriate attention that focuses on the negative qualities of someone or something, often exaggerating them, anger flares up. Blazing, it destroys merit and creates destructive karma that ripens into suffering.

Fortitude, the ability to remain internally calm when confronting harm or suffering, is the antidote to anger. Fortitude does not entail passively giving in or foolishly condoning harm. Rather, it enables clear thinking, mental stability, and creative problem solving. We consider various courses of action and choose one that will bring the most benefit and least harm to everyone in the situation. With fortitude we act firmly, sometimes with peaceful strength, other times with assertive compassion.

> Lurking in its dark pit of ignorance,
> Unable to bear the wealth and excellence of others,
> It swiftly injects them with its cruel poison:
> The snake of jealousy—protect us from this danger!

Jealousy, like other disturbing emotions, stems from ignorance of the nature of reality. Like a snake whose venom kills a healthy person, jealousy poisons the happiness and goodness of ourselves and others. Overcome by jealousy, we try to demolish the happiness and success of those we envy. But ultimately such behavior

is self-defeating, because even if we succeed, we do not feel good about ourselves when we undermine another's well-being. Such spiteful jealousy not only lessens our own self-respect, it also suffocates our mental peace.

Rejoicing in the happiness, talents, fortune, and good qualities of others is the antidote to jealousy. When others are happy or have good qualities, we might as well rejoice! There is so much suffering in the world; it would be foolish to wish that others be deprived of whatever happiness they have.

Rejoicing is the lazy person's way to create great merit. When we rejoice at others' virtues, we accumulate merit as if we had acted in those beneficial ways ourselves. Rejoicing spurs us along the path to awakening and also brings us immediate happiness.

> Roaming the fearful wilds of inferior practice,
> And the barren wastes of absolutism and nihilism,
> They sack the towns and hermitages of benefit and bliss:
> The thieves of wrong views—protect us from this danger!

Just as we protect our treasured possessions from thieves, we must take care that our right views on important spiritual matters are safeguarded. Adhering to wrong views causes us to engage in practices that purportedly lead to awakening but actually do not. They leave us impoverished, stranded in a spiritual desert.

We might be surprised to discover the number of wrong views we hold and the stubborn tenacity with which we hold them. When someone challenges our wrong views, we become upset and defensive. We may even disparage dharma teachings when they do not agree with our opinions.

The chief wrong views hold to the two extremes: absolutism and nihilism. Absolutism reifies the way in which phenomena exist, whereas nihilism negates aspects of their existence. While all persons and phenomena are empty of independent existence, absolutism holds that they exist independently, with their own inherent essence. Nihilism goes to the other extreme, disparaging the functioning of cause and effect. Adhering to either absolutism or nihilism prevents us from properly understanding both the ultimate nature and the conventional nature of phenomena. The Middle Way view enables us to distinguish accurately between what exists and what doesn't, and to know what to practice and what to abandon.

> Binding embodied beings in the unbearable prison,
> Of cyclic existence with no freedom,
> It locks them in craving's tight embrace:
> The chain of miserliness—protect us from this danger!

Craving for the enjoyments of cyclic existence and the miserliness it produces chains us to suffering. We cling to our possessions, unable to part with them, and hoard our knowledge.

It's easy to think we're generous and magnanimous when we read this. We say to ourselves, "I'm not attached. I'd be happy to share whatever I have with others." But should somebody ask us for our lunch, we may respond, "No, I'm hungry!" Or if somebody took our shoes from outside the meditation hall, we would be upset.

Believing that possessions will bring us security in cyclic existence, we fear that if we give things to others, we won't have what we need. In fact, our miserliness keeps us bound in a prison of discontent. We constantly crave more and better, never satisfied with what we have.

Nonclinging and generosity are the antidotes to miserliness. With nonclinging we don't conceive of material possessions as a reliable source of happiness or as an indicator of success. We discover contentment, a rare "commodity" in our materialistic society. Contentment allows us to cultivate the love that wishes others to have happiness, which in turn stimulates the mind that takes delight in giving. Giving with an open heart brings us joy and directly benefits others.

> Sweeping us in the torrent of cyclic existence so hard to cross,
> Where, conditioned by the propelling winds of karma,
> We are tossed in the waves of birth, aging, sickness, and death:
> The flood of attachment—protect us from this danger!

Like a flood, attachment sweeps over us, propelling us helplessly into the stormy ocean of cyclic existence. Under the influence of attachment to people, possessions, praise, power, and reputation, we harm others to get what we want. Our destructive actions create conflict and leave karmic seeds that produce suffering later on. In addition, at the time of death, strong attachment arises and we cling to our body and life. When we realize we cannot hold on to them, attachment then grasps another body and life, and rebirth occurs.

The mind of attachment is narrow and limited. We become obsessed with the object of our attachment; we worry about not getting it and fear losing it once we have it. Drowning in the flood of attachment, we are unable to abide in satisfaction and peace.

We need a guiding star to find our way across the dark seas of the disturbing emotions. The Sanskrit noun tara means "star," and the verb trri means "to guide across" or "to cross over." The dharma is our raft, and Tara is the star guiding us across cyclic existence

to the other shore, nirvana. But Tara can't do it alone. We must listen, reflect, and meditate on the teachings and transform our mind.

Contemplating our transient nature is an excellent antidote to attachment. Seeing that the things we cling to change moment by moment, we know that they will not last long and thus are not reliable sources of happiness. Turning away from their deceptive lure, we have more time to familiarize our minds with bodhicitta and wisdom, progressing along the stages of the bodhisattva path to buddhahood.

Reflecting on the disadvantages of cyclic existence is another antidote. If a prisoner believes that prison life isn't that bad, he will have no interest in freeing himself. Similarly, as long as we believe cyclic existence to be comfortable, we won't seek liberation. For this reason, in the four noble truths, the Buddha asked us first to reflect on the unsatisfactory nature of our existence and its causes so we might seek their cessation and the path leading to that state of peace.

> Roaming in the space of darkest confusion,
> Tormenting those who strive for ultimate aims,
> It is viciously lethal to liberation:
> The carnivorous demon of doubt—protect us from this danger!

There are various types of doubt, and not all of them are obstructive. The doubt that is curious and open-minded propels us to learn, examine, and clarify the meaning of a teaching; it aids us on the path. However, the doubt that dwells in confusion and leans toward wrong views causes our mind to spiral in circles of its own making and immobilizes us spiritually. Resembling a carnivorous demon, it destroys our chance for liberation.

If our mind is spinning in skeptical doubt, when we start to do a practice, we doubt its efficacy and quit doing it. Listening to teachings, we doubt their authenticity and stop attending. We doubt our ability to practice, the ability of our teacher to guide us, the possibility of awakening. Unable to resolve our doubts, we remain stuck and tormented. This demon of doubt obstructs our chance to attain liberation and full awakening.

To counteract doubt, we must first stop the flurry of contradictory thoughts and calm our mind. Meditating on the breath dispels discursive thoughts and focuses our attention. A settled mind can distinguish important issues that need consideration from nonsensical, doubting thoughts.

Next, we must study the Buddha's teachings and train our minds in reasoning so we are able to think clearly. In this way, we investigate the teachings, draw out their deeper meanings, and reach correct conclusions. For this reason, Tibetan monastics spend

years debating and discussing the scriptures. Although we may not engage in formal debate, discussing topics with dharma friends fulfills the same purpose. We can clarify what we believe and practice accordingly.

These are the eight dangers from which Tara protects us. In addition to meditating and applying the antidotes described above, we can visualize Tara in front of us. The green light radiating from her flows into us, filling our body/mind, purifying and eliminating the disturbing emotions and the destructive karma we have created under their influence. Tara's blissful green light fills the universe and all the beings within it, liberating them from the eight dangers and enhancing their love, compassion, and wisdom.

> Through these praises and requests to you,
> Quell conditions unfavorable for dharma practice,
> And let us have long life, merit, glory, plenty,
> And other conducive conditions as we wish!

By meditating on Tara and applying the antidotes to the eight dangers in order to benefit all beings, we create tremendous merit. Directing how we want it to ripen, we then dedicate it: first, for all sentient beings to be free from conditions hindering dharma practice, such as poor health, poverty, and cynicism; and second, to meet all conditions conducive for actualizing the path

to awakening, such as long life, requisites for life, the guidance of kind and wise spiritual mentors, and suitable circumstances for study and practice.

Although the above verses are phrased in the manner of supplicating Tara to protect us from the various dangers, we must remember that Tara is not an inherently existent external deity. Like all persons and phenomena, she exists dependently and is empty of inherent existence. Although all beings who have become Tara are free from limitations from their side to help others, they are not omnipotent. They can teach, guide, and inspire us only to the extent that we are receptive. Reciting and contemplating these verses opens our minds and hearts to practice their meaning. The more we generate impartial love and compassion for all beings, the more Tara can influence us. The greater our wisdom of the ultimate nature, the more Tara can inspire us to deepen our realizations.

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Fully Engaged in Body, Speech, and Mind

Anne C.Klein on the foundational practices of Dzogchen, through which we can meet the dharma with our entire being and dissolve conceptual mind into the "great expanse" that is liberation.

Is there a paradox at work in the dharma? We enter practice because we want something—peace, liberation, openhearted presence. We learn that in order to get these we must do certain things. So we make effort. But we cannot really accomplish what we wish through effort. Effort can even be an obstacle.

We want the most profound, most penetrating, most efficacious practices, and we want them so much and in such habitual ways that we don't always recognize what they are when we have them. Moreover, we tend to want them with our heads, or out of our emotional distress. Certain kinds of wanting prevent our opening to something more profound than ordinary wanting, to the kind of deep longing that makes us truly receptive.

Although this tension is natural, even inevitable, our most vibrant contact with the teachings does not occur through effort or narrow wanting. It comes when we meet the teachings in our body and being with an open heart-mind. We can't actually do anything about this tricky setup. We can, however, sit with it and gradually allow a shift to take place. This shift is not simply a change of ideas but a shift in our being. And practice is crucial for setting this shift in motion, even if practice itself cannot make it happen.

One can look more closely at this interesting matter through noting how Dzogchen ("Great Completeness" or "Great Perfection") traditions work with this conundrum. Dzogchen equates any type of thinking, or even the presence of a thought-image, with a conceptual mind. And all conceptual minds are, by definition, effortful. Such a mind, Dzogchen teachers emphasize, will never contact the effortless state of liberation. Yet one must begin somehow, so one begins with foundational practices, known as ngöndro. These are practices that have traditionally provided entry to, and a vital foundation for, Dzogchen and other tantric paths. Looking closely at a few elements of these practices, we find crucial clues on how to meet the tricky situation of effort and non-effort, which affects practitioners across a broad band of traditions.

Clues to the release of the apparent paradox of effort come not only in the practices designed to melt away conception, but also in profound stories about the transmission of those practices.

The practices are what you do until you realize the story is true. Sometimes we are so focused on doing a practice "right" that we don't pay much attention to what created that practice in the first place and how it was transmitted. In oral and also in written teachings in Tibet, there are always stories of how the text or instruction one is receiving first emerged. In fact these stories are usually told before the practice itself is unveiled, and then more stories unfold as further explanation is given. As I look for clues about the deep structure of practice, I find these stories profoundly instructive. They have helped me begin to untie the paradoxical knot of effort and letting be.

These stories speak deeply to the entire dimensions of body, mind and energy. Therefore, they connect directly to foundational practices. This is important to the extent that we are interested in discovering how we can meet the teachings with our being rather than with our usual wanting self. In other words, how we can absorb practices into ourselves, rather than holding them at arm's length, which is what happens when we wield them with effort.

The foundational practices of ngöndro are ways to bring body, speech and mind into increasing harmony with the "great expanse" talked about in the Dzogchen teachings. This expanse is another name for reality, for mind-nature, for the state of liberation. Its vastness challenges the cramped and reified self-images that temporarily obstruct our view of the whole. Finitudes of

any kind—the sense of being small, contained, an urgent rush of business, passions or plans—are simply conceptions. These conceptions are both the cause and the effect of energetic holdings in the body. The foundational practices illuminate these holdings and, finally, lead to their dissolution into that expanse. As my teacher Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche has said, "Like a fire burning fuel, the mind consumes conception by working with it."

In the Tibetan traditions, teaching and practice sessions typically open with a reference to the foundational practices. Every lineage has its own variations, but the basic structure and principles of ngöndro are virtually identical across the Tibetan systems. The sequence usually begins, after an acknowledgement of one's guru or lineage and the intention to benefit all beings, with the Four Thoughts. These four are reflections on (1) the preciousness of one's own life, (2) its fragility and the uncertainty of death's timing, (3) the inexorable nature of karma, and (4) the impossibility of avoiding suffering so long as ignorance keeps one in samsara. In addition, there are two other contemplations: (5) the benefits of liberation compared to life in samsara and (6) the importance of a spiritual guide. These six are known as the outer foundational practices.

These six outer practices are combined with five inner practices, each of which needs to be repeated 100,000 times. The first inner foundational practice is refuge, which is accompanied by the

second, prostrations. There are different styles of prostrations, but these variations can be summarized as “long” and “short.” Both begin by touching facing palms to heart, crown, throat and heart again. In the long prostration one then stretches full-length to the floor, arms extended; in the short prostration, one touches the ground with the “five points” of head, two hands and two knees (the two feet already on the ground are not part of this count). Once practiced, this is a very fluid motion, further animated by the rhythm of the refuge recitation

The bodhicitta recitation, the third of the five practices, is repeated so as to strengthen one’s intention to practice with a mind expansive enough to encompass the welfare of all living beings. The fourth practice is that of the hundred-syllable mantra associated with the radiant white Vajrasattva. It is said that Vajrasattva, whose name means “adamantine being,” prayed that when he became enlightened he would have a special power to relieve beings of the obstructions to their enlightenment. Fifth is the mandala offering, in which one symbolically offers up all of one’s wealth, possessions and sense of one’s world.

A special feature of the mandala offering in the Longchen Nyingthig (“The Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse,” a cycle of Dzogchen teachings) is the offering of the three buddha bodies—the enlightened dimensions of the emanation, resplendent and true aspects of enlightened beings. This in fact is an opportunity

to experience the nature of reality as always offering and giving of itself. Indeed, every one of the foundational practices is an opportunity to experience some aspect of reality. Through the sheer process of repetition the mind is naturally drawn to discover new meaning behind the practice, and it is these discoveries that light the way. All these practices are also forms of Guru Yoga—they all provide opportunities to unify with the enlightened mind of the Buddha guru. Explicit Guru Yoga is also a crucial practice, and while it is not technically considered ngöndro, practitioners also accumulate recitations of the Vajra Guru mantra, ideally ten million over one's lifetime.

The foundational practices thus combine mind-training through the four thoughts, surrendering oneself through prostrations, purification through Vajrasattva, prayers to the lineage, and above all, unification with Lama Mind in Guru Yoga. All these practices together, and any one of them individually, flow into the view of Dzogchen. Each of the inner practices offers an opportunity to allow your conceptual processes, thoughts and visualizations to dissolve into vastness. That vastness is an effortless state. Concepts and striving only obstruct it. Thus, ngöndro absorbs one's effort and transforms it into effortlessness. It is a path of many blessings, gradually reconfiguring the energies of body, speech and mind.

The way of doing the foundational practices is also important with respect to the question of effort and effortlessness. Daily practice in the Tibetan traditions typically involves three deeply integrated elements: words, chanted melody and the energetically felt presence of enlightened beings who appear in front of you, dissolve into you or arise within you.

Instructions for meditation are chanted aloud rhythmically, for they are poetry. The words describe the deities who are present and then address them, making requests, asking for blessings, above all establishing a relationship with them and with the part of oneself that they in a sense express. The rhythmic melody opens and moves currents of energy; the chanted words describe the vivid colors, poses and ornaments of the enlightened beings with you in meditation. You are engaged cognitively, energetically, imaginatively and vocally.

These practices provide a point of departure from which we can step into space, letting go completely. Finding that point of departure, that foundation, is what these practices are about. Literally *ngöndro* means "that which goes before;" *ngön* in Tibetan means "before," and *dro* means "to go." So they are usually translated as "preliminary practices." This might be bad press, because most of us like to think of ourselves as sophisticated people who don't need preliminaries. It is also misleading, because it sounds like a kind of kindergarten, something you graduate from. But you never

leave these practices behind, just like a house never moves off its foundation. You don't build a foundation and then say, "Now we'll put the house somewhere else." Every time you walk into your house, you are standing on its foundation, and every time you do a practice, you do it from this foundation.

That is why no matter who you are, you do them. As another of my teachers, Lama Rinpoche, said, "His Holiness the Dalai Lama did them before receiving Longchen Nyingthig from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. I'm a tulku, and I did foundational practices five times before I received Dzogchen." That's what practitioners do.

In talking this way, Lama Rinpoche was addressing a student who felt inclined to bypass the foundations. At some level, we all may have that feeling of wanting to bypass foundations. We think we are exceptional, our needs are very particular, we have certain innate qualities or experiences that put us in a different category from other people, and so on. Who among us has not had such thoughts? This is merely the pleading of ordinary, unaware mind, the one that practice dissolves—eventually.

Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche, who taught me these foundational practices nearly thirty years ago, elaborates on them in a book of lectures given during his first visit to the United States in 1974. This book, called *Tantric Practice in Nyingma*, very clearly

describes the chants and imagined vistas of those practices. Translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, the book is a commentary on *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, the beloved classic by Patrül Rinopche.

Patrül Rinpoche himself said that while some see Dzogchen teachings as profound, for him the foundational practices are even more profound. This point is very easy to miss as we focus our efforts on attaining the "highest." In my occasional role as oral translator for lamas, I have often seen this happen to students. Mara has many clever devices, and the belief that one can judge these things by ordinary criteria is one of them.

The practices known as foundational—and too easily dismissed by the limited self as merely preliminary—are brilliantly designed to reveal that the self that grasps or disdains them is in profound tension with the awakened state from which the practices themselves emerge and to which they can open us. It is a fruitful, unavoidable tension, a blessed tension that energizes the entire path.

By examining them in more detail, we can see how the foundational practices, and the stories about their ultimate origin, contribute to dissolving the "problem" of needing effort to reach an effortless state. Let us consider how (1) mind-training, (2) the practice of Vajrasattva (which combines several elements typical of Tibetan tantric meditation) and (3) the stories of Dzogchen's

transmission contribute to such opening and to our understanding of what these traditions mean when they say we can ripen through relying on the blessings of the lineage.

Mind-Training

The chief mind-training has to do with the Four Thoughts, which yield awareness and finally acceptance of personal impermanence. No longer needing to maintain the pretense of permanence facilitates grounding in and acceptance of this mortal body. As Patrül Rinpoche wrote in *Words of My Perfect Teacher*,

> In your mother's womb, turn your mind to the Dharma
> As soon as you are born, remember the Dharma of death.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, "Ego is always wanting to achieve spirituality. It is rather like wanting to witness your own funeral." Remembering the dharma of death, as expressed in the traditional contemplation above, is the opposite of wanting to attend your own funeral. It is preparing to know the vastness from which we emerge.

Life is a party on death row. Recognizing mortality means we are willing to see what is true. Seeing what is true is grounding. It brings us into the present and, eventually, into presence. It also brings us into our own bodies, especially if we combine meditation on impermanence with an energetic awareness at the base

of the spine. At first, the important thing about impermanence seems to be the limited time we have in this precious life. This is crucial and foundational, and yet it is not the whole story.

The teachings on impermanence are not only about the death of the self that never existed. Understanding impermanence, Khetsun Rinpoche says in commenting on *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, will lead you into the natural clarity of your own mind. The ideas of a finite self, ideas which initially make us want to practice, can dissolve. To know impermanence is thus not only a path to what Dzogchen traditions speak of as unbounded wholeness (*thigle nyag cig*) —it is also integral to it.

The mind grasping toward wholeness at the expense of "lesser" insights is profoundly mistaken, as it will discover through trial and error. It begins to approach and sense the charisma of that reality at the point when the teachings can begin to connect with something deeper than the usual self-state. Even at the very outset, what these practices themselves contain, like that for which they provide a foundation, is beyond expression.

Vajrasattva

In this visualization practice, we find all the melodic, kinesthetic and imaginative elements that help bring all your energies to bear on your practice. Physically you are seated in meditation posture and energetically you feel the chanting vibrate through your body,

connecting you with other voices in the room. With this as a support it is easy to be wholeheartedly engaged in the contemplation. You begin by reciting:

> Ah! At the crown of my own head
> Wide white lotus, full moon orb
> White *Hum* Vajrasattva yields
> Brilliant white, resplendent form
> Holding vajra, consort, bell
> Protect me and purify
> These wrongs I rue and show you
> I bind forever, on my life.
> On a moon disc at your heart
> *Hum* circled by your own mantra
> Which I chant, invoking you.

Lama Rinpoche, a monk who teaches mainly in Asia, observes that chanting in poetic rhythm brings in blessings more strongly. Blessings are most certainly a kind of energetic coursing through the body, and chanting helps energy move more fluidly. All the foundational practices move energy through the body; this is one element of their profundity. While tantra teaches even more explicitly and precisely about energy, all Buddhist practices affect energy in some way.

Tibetans attribute the power of their practices, transmissions and lamas to a type of energy literally known as "waves of splendor" (*jin lab*). The first syllable, *jin*, means "that which has been given or bestowed," as in "bestowed by the king." *Jin* also means "grace" or "gift" or even in some contexts "splendor." The second syllable, *lab*, means wave, like the waves of an ocean. Early Tibetan kings were considered direct descendants of the gods and so these kings were imbued with supernatural qualities such as *jin*—pomp, splendor, magnificence. Thus, *jin lab*, which began as the splendor of kings, later became in Buddhist understanding the waves of grace, or surges of splendor, that are the most profound gifts of lamas. This is what comes through the mind-body in practice. This is also what is transmitted from teacher to student, and in initiation. The ultimate source of these blessings is reality itself. It is reality releasing its intrinsic energy to practitioners, until they recognize the source for what it is.

The importance of recognizing our precious human body in mind-training has already been noted. The Vajrasattva practice brings attention to the body in a different way; it is a call to connect with the blessing—the light of the radiant Vajrasattva—and to bring it into every part of our body. Vajrasattva is a purification practice. The light is felt to be eradicating all that obscures your own enlightened state. In the process of incorporating this light, you may discover some psychosomatic resistance that prevents you from fully lighting up or inhabiting the space of your own

body. This resistance is an inevitable part of our way of holding to a finite self, and the more we are aware of it, the more easily it will dissolve, revealing the vast expanse.

In response to our request, light flows down from Vajrasattva through our crown, filling our body; it courses through every pore and corpuscle of our material being, and fills our entire awareness as well. In the process, our coarse material body fills with and becomes light and Vajrsattva blends inseparably with us. We glow and light up the universe, giving and receiving blessings. Then we dissolve back into radiant emptiness and are present in a different way.

This combination of chanting, vivid imagination and cognitive understanding is very powerful. There is every possibility that these will transform your body, energy and mental state. At the same time, this very possibility can lure you into thinking that the important thing is what you do rather than how you are. This means you have been deluded into thinking your real purpose lies with training your usual, thought-full mind to "do" these practices well. But ego can't attend its own funeral any more than the ordinary self can experience enlightenment. Practice is about finding the fire that dissolves the self. It is about finding a way to leave the illusion of self behind and still be there. Illusion vanishes when, as in the Vajrasattva practice, we dissolve into the radiant expanse.

Again and again in the course of these practices, we dissolve into and arise from this expanse. Every such dissolution and emergence is an opportunity to practice and learn about empty mind-space: the way emptiness relates to form, the way unconstructed inner space relates to constructs and concepts.

Part of the genius of the tradition is to repeat these foundational practices so many times. It is not that you finish with them when you complete a hundred thousand repetitions. You do them every day, even if you are the Dalai Lama. This is a daily practice. It just grows, especially if you are able to do some of these practices in retreat. To learn them is simple, and then they have unbelievable power, an effect you could not predict based just on intellectual knowledge of them or cursory dipping into them.

This power doesn't come through in a single session or a single day. It has a quality of unfolding, but this doesn't mean we always and only make steady progress toward the light. Bad days come in time, especially after good days. You don't just get happier and happier and happier. Seasoned practitioners know that. One way to conceptualize what occurs is that in practice we continually come up against who and what we are right now, and this is often at odds with the part of our being we are practicing to bring into manifestation. So I may sit down to become Vajrasattva, which is

really an aspect that is always present with me, but as soon as I sit down I feel the anger or fear that is most conflated with my identity at this moment. We practice in the midst of that.

Then something else can happen: magic. Often it comes after the most terrible moments. We don't always know why one or the other arises, but we do come to see that it's a process. The wisdom of these practices is that we just do them. We just do them without focusing on whether we feel like it or not, or whether it is sufficiently "advanced" for us or not. It's a practice; it's a commitment, an unbreakable connection with the transmission. You're tired, and you do it. You're too busy, and you do it. You don't feel like it, and you do it. You keep that solidity of practice there, no matter what. That becomes a powerful thing.

In principle, these foundational practices are themselves sufficient. They contain blessings connecting us to the ultimate source, the primordial buddha known as Samantabhadra, who personifies naked reality. They contain elements of sutra, tantra and Dzogchen; and for one who has received insight, they themselves are Dzogchen practices. They provide us with a basis to receive mind-nature instructions and a foundation for all the explicit Dzogchen teachings of Yeshe Lama, the sequence of practices bestowed upon students when they complete the foundational practices. Above all they provide us with a way to connect

directly, daily and continuously to the living blessings, the "waves of splendor" that are the Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse, or whatever one's lineage might be.

Transmission

The story of how Dzogchen is transmitted is itself an introduction to reality. This does not mean we understand every story literally; however, it does mean we are open to receiving through them an understanding as yet unknown to the ordinary mind seeking those very teachings.

One dimension of reality is pure radiant truth, known as the dharmakaya, the true body or dimension of enlightened beings. Khetsun Rinpoche says that this dimension is like glass, and the light streaming through it is like those fabulous-looking buddhas known as Resplendent Dimension, or Sambhogakaya, buddhas. The teachings about these things are communicated in one of three ways: through mind-to-mind direct transmission, through the use of symbols, or through words. All these represent different stages of manifestation from naked truth. Of direct transmission there is little one can say, but examples of symbolic and oral transmission indicate the fluid line of transmission that connects them, and us, with the inexpressible source.

As Patrül Rinpoche puts it, from the primordial buddha Samantabhadra emerge infinite magical displays of compassion that arise as ubiquitous buddhas and their pure lands, starting with Vajrsattva. Samantabhadra's "circle of disciples is not different from himself." This is a token of confidence for practitioners, since it indicates that enlightened reality is everywhere. It cannot be lost. The ordinary mind may have forgotten it, but the ordinary mind will never find it either. Practices let the fire of reality itself consume that ordinary mind.

There are many astounding stories of transmission. Fantastic sounding as they are, especially to secularized Westerners, they present a vision of wholeness that, while inexpressible, is passionately, tangibly and kinesthetically experienced. It doesn't require effort to hear these stories, and you can be so drawn into them that you forget to make the kind of effort that divides you from the real nature you seek. In Words of My Perfect Teacher, Patrül Rinpoche displays this (and more) most ingeniously in a story of how the pith instructions of Dzogchen came into the world. Here are a few abbreviated scenes from this tale:

> Adhichitta, living in the heavenly realms, has a vision. All the Buddhas
> of past, present and future come before him and invoke Vajrasattva:
> You who possess the jewel of miraculous means,
> Open the gate to all that beings desire.

Vajrasattva, who as we already know emanates directly from primordial reality, responds to this invocation just the way he does in the foundational practices—light pours out from his heart. In this case, however, the light becomes a brilliant, jeweled wheel offered to Sattvavajra, the lettered reflection of Vajrasattva's own name, and also a name for Vajrapani, the bodhisattva of power. It's a revelatory moment—one expression of the primordial nature requesting teachings from another who equally mirrors it. This teaching is seen here less as a path to reality than as the play of reality's presence. Practice invites us to join in the game; that is, we are beckoned to consciously and joyously participate in a game we have never left.

Receiving this gift, Sattvavajra promises to teach. Drawing on the wisdom of all Buddhas in all five Pure Lands, those same Pure Lands which we already know are expressions of Samantabhadra, the "distilled essence of all the Conquerors' wisdom." He transmits all these riches without a word, through symbols. Adhichitta, uniquely capable of comprehending them, then becomes a symbol himself. He instantly transforms into the letter *hum*, seed syllable of enlightened beings. Emerging from the hum state in yet another guise, he brings these teachings into the human realm of writing and speech.

This fluid movement bringing primordial reality into expression through symbols and words suggests the flowing movement of "waves of splendor" through the body of practitioners. The best of these practitioners carry Dzogchen expression forward in time, into history and into the minds of new practitioners. The spontaneous arising of the teaching from the natural dynamism of naked reality mirrors the effortless spontaneity of realization. Opening to the stream means releasing the effort that, perhaps, brought one into initial contact with it.

For example, the Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse, one of the most widely renowned Dzogchen lineages, emerges from the visionary writing compiled by Jigme Lingpa. Jigme Lingpa (1729-1798) was considered an incarnation of both Trisong Detsen, the religious eighth-century king of Tibet, and Vimalamitra, a great master of Dzogchen during the same period. Going to bed one evening, Jigme Lingpa's heart was heavy because he was not in Guru Rinpoche's direct presence. Praying deeply, he went into luminous clarity in which he, while flying over the stupa at Boudhanath, encountered a Sky Woman, a dakini, who entrusted him with a wooden casket in which he found yellow scrolls and crystal beads. Swallowing these, as yet another dakini instructed him, he had, in Tulku Thondup's words, "the amazing experience that all the words of the Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse cycle with their meanings had been awakened in his mind as if they were imprinted there." He had received a profound symbolic

communication. His further special gift was to transpose this into words. But those words did not come to him through training and straining his ordinary mind, like the writers of ordinary words will do. The words flowed to and through him effortlessly.

Jigme Lingpa became extremely learned, not through study, but through the visionary transformation of his practice. His luminous, voluminous writings are a testament to the power of reality and nonconceptual vastness to express itself in words through the power of blessings. No effort could produce, or even permit, the clarity that he experienced. Yet, he practiced intensely for years before revelation came to him. In this story, he models the transition from effortful striving to artful endeavor.

Practicing with ease means easing away from the ordinary mind with its tightly knotted purposes. Every focus, however useful, limits us in some way. We practice in this way until concepts and images dissolve into a space that is limitless, offering no center on which to focus. No focus, therefore, for effort.

The words and symbols of the transmission, carrying the blessings of their source, are closer to the fire of wisdom, closer to "the original," primordial buddha, than our far less vibrant concepts. So long as the smoke of our effort obscures them, we cannot fully appreciate the full splendor that is their source and ours. Finding effortless ease means burning these purposeful thoughts. We wait

in simple awareness for the fire to consume them, thereby disclosing the presence that is our nature. We respond to words and symbols that have until now receded before the effortful creation of finite realities.

In 1974, in Charlottesville, Virginia, Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche concluded his teaching on Jigme Lingpa's foundational practices by saying, "My own hope is that any among you who would like to begin these foundational practices will do so. In that case I will return and teach you the paths of Dzogchen." He did indeed return nearly a half dozen times. At the age of eighty-three he is about to visit once more in order, he told us on the phone, to "say Tashi Deleg" (farewell, or best wishes) to his friends and students. He, like the tertön in Tibet, like great lamas everywhere, is for students the embodied expression of the stream of transmission emanating from the primordial field. This stream is what students receive from teachers. Even in a student's simple act of requesting this, the mind of chatter and distraction is invited to subside and so reveal what ordinary mind can never know. As Jigme Lingpa explains in his foundational practice text:

> Praying from my heart center
> Not just mouthings, not just words
> Bless me from your heart expanse
> Fulfill my aspirations.
> With strong resolve that never weakens

May Lama's blessed mindstream enter me.
All are from the first highest pure lands
Gods, mantras, True Bodies ever pure
With no work of "do this don't do that"
Radiant true-mind past thought or knowing
May I see reality nakedly
In rainbow space where thoughts are freed, may
My visions of spheres and Buddhas grow
Full true-mind display, Buddha Pure Lands.

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You're Caught in a Dream. Wake Up!

When you see that much of your life is spent in dreamlike states, says Pema Khandro Rinpoche, you are freed from the suffering they cause.

If we think about it, we see that our lives are consumed by a series of dreamlike states: memories, daydreams, fantasies, future plans, emotional states, imagination, fears. Like nighttime dreams, all these mental states are partially based on "reality" and partially based on our interpretations, projections, and extrapolations.

These are produced by what is called in Tibetan the *sprul pa'i sems*—the mind that functions like a magician generating illusions. It is taking place all the time, both inwardly and in the way the world arises. The text *The Laughter of the Dakini* says, "Like a magician's illusion, like a flash of lightning, like a dream—all phenomena that arise from causes and conditions are like these." If we can recognize this, then it is like lucid dreaming during our daily lives.

As it says in *The Dakini's Heart*, we practice meditation to unravel the root of suffering by discovering our mental afflictions are also like dreams. If we aren't familiar with mind's dreamlike propensities, we make our afflictions into our reality. If our habit is aggression, we can read anger into everything. If our habit is insecurity, we can read self-loathing into anything. We project our own emotions onto others. Acting on these misperceptions is how we produce negative karma. When we live caught in a dream that we don't know we're dreaming, we suffer tremendously.
To wake up and apprehend that dream for what it is—this is why Buddhists meditate. Meditation is a way of getting to know mind. Far beyond exotic fantasies of enlightenment is the everyday wakefulness of simply coming to understanding how mind functions. Only then can we function appropriately and freely within the scope of mind's propensities.

Does observing the dreamlike power of mind negate our thoughts and feelings? No. Dreamlike phenomena must still be treated with respect and compassion. When we see projections for what they are, our mind becomes supple and agile. Yet the dream still matters. The goal is to gain the freedom to respond to it with presence, altruism, and an explorer mindset. Having apprehended the dream through meditation, explorations of ultimate importance may now ensue—What is reality? Is it possible to see beyond our projections? If so how? By waking up to the dream, we open the doorway to a supple mind and a more wakeful exploration of life.

Pema Khandro Rinpoche is recognized as a tulku in the Nyingma and Kagyu lineages. She is the founder of Ngakpa International and the MahaSiddha Center in Berkeley, California.