



INTRODUCTION TO THE BUDDHIST PATH

“One is one’s own master. Who else can be one’s master?
S/he that is skillful and master her/himself will fulfill every purpose.” The Buddha

THE THREE VEHICLES

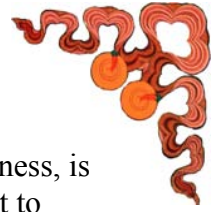
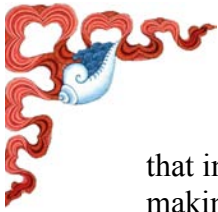
I would like to provide a brief explanation about the Buddhist Path. As you may know, in Buddhism, there exist two main yanas (vehicles): Hinayana and Mahayana. The second yana, Mahayana, is comprised of two levels of practice: Bodhisattvayana and Vajrayana (Tantra). These yanas (Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana) each include two foundations (two truths), two paths (wisdom and method), and two results (form body and truth body). Although all three yanas are comprised of the same core elements, how each yana defines these elements (the two foundations, two paths and two results) is distinct. The diverse nature of these elements in each of the yanas originates from the teachings given by Shakyamuni Buddha. Depending on each individual’s level and ability, they would receive the appropriate teachings.

From the Hinayana point of view the two truths are: *convention truth* and the *ultimate truth*. The convention truth would be *the self*; the ultimate truth is the *selflessness* of the self. Within Hinayana, the *method* means accumulating positive merit and *wisdom* involves the understanding of the selflessness of the self. In Hinayana the *form body* refers to the enlightened body and the *truth body* is the enlightened mind. According to this vehicle, the accumulation of positive merit purifies the self and results in the enlightened body, and the understanding of selflessness of the self leads to the realization of the enlightened mind. Furthermore, this principle of the two truths (convention and ultimate truth) also exists for all phenomena, not only for the self. It is important to note that the motivation for a Hinayana meditator is for liberation of the self, which means that he or she is searching for freedom from suffering for him/herself.

In the Bodhisattvayana level of Mahayana the two truths are convention truth and ultimate truth. The *convention truth* is similar within Hinayana and Mahayana, but the ultimate truth varies. From the Mahayana point of view the *ultimate truth* states that the independently existing self does not exist. This is also referred to as the emptiness of the self. In Mahayana, *wisdom* involves the understanding of the emptiness of the self and of all phenomena and *method* involves cultivating bodhi mind and bodhicitta (loving kindness to all living beings). In Mahayana, the *form body* arises from the method (loving kindness compassion to all) and the *wisdom body* arises from the understanding of sunyata (emptiness).

In the Vajrayana level of Mahayana, the understanding of the two foundations (convention truth and ultimate truth) are the same as the Bodhisattva level of Mahayana. However, where these two levels of practice differ significantly is in relation to the two paths and the practice. In Vajrayana (which is also sometimes referred to as Buddhist Tantra) there are many differences in the two paths (wisdom and method), but here I will mention only a few.

They are both Mahayana practice because they both include loving-kindness and compassion for all sentient beings. One main difference is where it relates to *wisdom*, even though there is no difference in the object of sunyata, the subject of consciousness is very different. By this, I mean



that in Bodhisattvayana, the coarse level of consciousness, the waking level of consciousness, is making the effort to understand emptiness. However, in Tantra, there is a concerted effort to access and use the subtle consciousness (the pure nature of the mind) to observe the emptiness of phenomena. Through dealing with the channels and the chakras, one may utilize the subtle consciousness which will, in combination with inner bliss, provide the understanding of sunyata. This is a significant difference. In relation to the *method* Bodhicitta and the six perfections are the same as in the Bodhisattvayana, however, in Tantra there exists the unique practice, to meditate on the four enlightened qualities, which are practiced from the beginning. The four enlightened qualities include: the environment, body, objects and deeds. For the beginner, to meditate on:

- the environment is to visualize the mandala
- the body is to visualize oneself as a deity
- the objects is to visualize the dakas and dakinis, who hold sacred objects, are surrounded by rainbows, and other enlightened qualities
- the deeds is to visualize oneself realizing compassionate acts throughout the universe.

This is also referred to as deity yoga. The result in Vajrayana is enlightened body and enlightened mind.

Overall, even though each yana is comprised of the same core elements, they perceive the two foundations, two paths and two results differently. They each offer distinct definitions and descriptions of these core elements as outlined above, and also attribute different timeframes for reaching enlightenment, with Vajrayana being the quickest and most intense practice to reach enlightenment, followed by Mahayana, and thirdly by Hinayana.





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*“Patience is the supreme fortitude.
Patience is the supreme freedom,” thus said the Buddha.
Those who harm others are not true followers of the Buddha,
Nor true seekers, those who oppress others.*

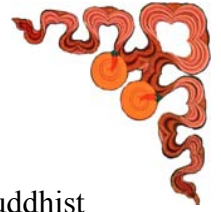
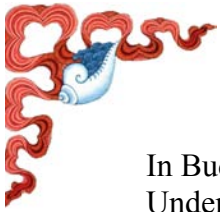
THE FOUR BUDDHIST TENETS

After the Buddha reached enlightenment in Bodhgaya, he taught many levels of teachings on how to overcome suffering. From several of these teachings arose the four Buddhist Tenets (codes and those who follow them), which are: Vaibhasika, Sautrantika, Madhyamika, and Cittamatra. From the teaching of the Four Noble Truths in Deer Park in Varanasi, India, two tenets arose: *Vaibhasika* and *Sautrantika*. From the teaching on Sunyata (emptiness) at Vulture’s Peak (Girdhakuta), arose *Madhyamika*. From the teaching at Vesali, where he taught the Mind Only School, arose *Cittamatra*

- Vaibhasika and Sautrantika accept the teachings of the Buddha as literal, without any interpretation;
- Madhyamika emphasizes the interdependence of all phenomena, the middle way; and
- Cittamatra asserts that everything arises from the mind (mind only school).

The four Buddhist Tenets can be divided into two categories, with Vaibhasika and Sautrantika being seen as Hinayana tenets and Madhyamika and Cittamatra being Mahayana tenets. This distinction is based on the view of emptiness presented by the tenets, as well as the literal or interpretive understanding of the teachings of the Buddha. The first two tenets, as mentioned above, accept the teachings of the Buddha as literal, whereas the final two tenets accept the teaching of the Buddha as holding deeper meaning beyond the literal. Those who follow the final two tenets study the teachings of the Buddha by examining his words, as well as interpreting them to unveil the more profound meaning held there.

The distinction based on the view of emptiness relates to how a person perceives the nature of phenomena, which determines whether a person is aligned with the Hinayana or Mahayana tenets. For example, the first two tenets view the root of suffering to be the grasping at the self, whereas the final two tenets view the root of suffering to be the belief in the inherent existence of the self and phenomena. This distinction found in the tenets relates to wisdom, whereas the method aspect of the path is determined by the role of Bodhicitta (loving-kindness and compassion). Thus a person can believe a Hinayana Tenet, yet be a Mahayana Buddhist or vice versa, depending on their view of wisdom (the tenets) or the method (loving-kindness). Thus, we can see there is a significant difference regarding these two approaches to the understanding of wisdom. In addition, the first two tenets will not refer to the grasping of the self as emptiness. The first two tenets assert that the realization of nirvana (overcoming suffering) is based on the understanding of the grasping of the self of a person, therefore they question the need to realize emptiness to overcome suffering. The Mahayana tenets, however, contend that emptiness (sunyata) is an essential practice to overcome ignorance and become free from suffering (reach nirvana).



In Buddhism there are four essential beliefs, which are also referred to as the *Four Seals*. Understanding and accepting the four seals are what make one a Buddhist as well as a Buddhist philosopher.

The four seals include:

- All products (compounded things) are impermanent
- All contaminated things are suffering
- All phenomena are empty and selfless
- Nirvana is Peace

Each of the four tenets discussed above, offers its own philosophy and distinct understandings of the four seals.

The teachings of the Buddha can also be divided into what are commonly referred to as the *three baskets*: morality (moral discipline of body, speech and mind), concentration (building the focus in the mind), and wisdom (seeing the true nature of reality). For example, in meditation we can see the three baskets as:

- the posture for meditation is morality;
- concentration is focusing on the object of the meditation and not allowing the mind to run all over the place; and
- once the mind is able to focus, it can be used to examine the nature of reality to uncover its true nature, which is wisdom.

A key distinction in the four tenets can also be found in relation to the three baskets, with the understanding of morality and concentration being similar among the four, but differing in their understanding of wisdom. The four tenets all recognize the three poisons (anger, attachment, and ignorance) as the causes of suffering, and agree on the nature of anger and attachment in relation to suffering. While the four tenets hold similar understandings of the pain of suffering caused by ignorance, they each have distinct perceptions of the role and function of ignorance at the root of suffering. Because wisdom is the antidote for ignorance, and ignorance is seen differently by each of the four tenets, the perception of wisdom also differs. Therefore, it is the different perception and understanding of wisdom that comprises the key distinctions in the four tenets.

There are many ancient texts and commentaries on the four tenets, for it is an expansive topic in Buddhism. Monks and nuns will study this subject (the four tenets) for more than 20 or 30 years to gain a strong understanding of them.





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“Within great bliss I manifest as Guru Yiddam. From my clear body, profusions of light rays radiate forth to the ten directions. Blessing the environment and the beings therein. All becomes most perfectly arrayed with only excellent qualities, infinitely pure.”

from Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga,
composed by Great Tibetan Master Panchen Lama Losang Chö Gyen

THE FIVE DHYANA BUDDHAS

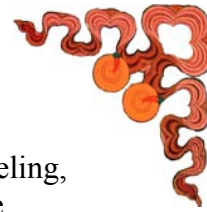
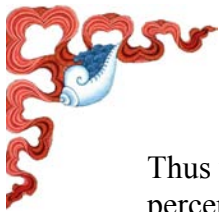
The five Dhyana Buddhas play an important role in Buddhist Tantra, especially in relation to the creation of sacred mandalas. Mandala is a Sanskrit word meaning circle, and in Tibetan they are called *kyil-khor*, which means essence and circle. There are four common forms of mandalas: painted mandalas, particle mandalas, body mandalas and concentration mandalas. Although each is a beautiful work of art, it is important to remember that they represent profound spiritual teachings. In Buddhism, Buddhist mandalas reflect the four directions and contain five colors. Each of the colors and the symbol that is depicted on the colors represent the five Dhyana Buddhas. For example, in the mandala of compassion, the central circle is red and holds within it the symbol of the lotus with the syllable HRIH. The lotus symbolizes Amitabha, with one face and two arms, holding the lotus and the bell with his consort, Pandaravasini, holding the curved knife and a skull. They purify attachment and transform ordinary perception to achieve wisdom of discernment.

In the east of the mandala is the color blue, with the symbol of the vajra (dorje) and represents the syllable HUNG. The vajra symbolizes Akshobhya, who is holding a bell and dorje. His consort, Vajravahari is holding a curved knife and skull. They purify anger (hatred) and transform ordinary consciousness to achieve the wisdom of reality.

In the south of the mandala of compassion is the color yellow, with the symbol of the jewel, and representing the syllable TAM. The jewel symbolizes Ratnasambhava, who is holding the jewel and the bell. His consort, Mamaki, is holding a curved knife and skull. They purify negative pride and miserliness and transform ordinary feeling into wisdom of equality.

In the west of the mandala is the color white, with the symbol of the wheel and represents the syllable OM. The wheel symbolizes Vairochana, who holds a wheel and a bell. His consort, Lochana, is holding a curved knife and a skull. They purify ignorance and transform ordinary form to achieve mirror-like wisdom.

The north of the mandala is green, with the symbol of the sword and represents the syllable KAM. The sword symbolizes Amoghasiddha, who holds a sword and a bell. His consort, Samaya Tara, is holding a curved knife and a skull. This purifies jealousy and transforms ordinary formation to achieve wisdom of accomplishment.



Thus we can see how each of the Dhyana Buddhas relate to the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness), the purification of the five poisons (ignorance, negative pride and miserliness, attachment, jealousy, and anger/hatred) and transforming the five aggregates to achieve various aspects of wisdom. Thus, the five wisdoms, the five aggregates and the five poisons, the five symbols, five colors, and five syllables are all represented by the five Dhyana Buddhas and found within each mandala.

Every living being contains five contaminated aggregates, and through the practice of Tantra, these aggregates are purified (become uncontaminated), increasingly reflecting the enlightened qualities of the Dhyana Buddhas.





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*But without the practice of the perfection of wisdom,
The obstructions will not come to an end. (Verse 41b)*

*Thus, to eliminate all obstructions
To liberation and omniscience,*

*The practitioner should continually cultivate
The perfection of wisdom with skillful means.” (Verse 42)
Atisha’s Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*

THE FIVE PATHS

In Buddhism there are *Five Paths* that outline where a person finds him/herself on the *Stages of the Path to Nirvana or Enlightenment*. The five paths include:

- Path of Accumulation (*Tsog lam*)
- Path of Preparation (*Jor lam*)
- Path of Seeing (*Tong lam*)
- Path of Meditation (*Gom lam*)
- Path of No More Learning (*Me lhop lam*)

In relation to the five paths, it is helpful to know that there are three vehicles (yanas) that each describe the five paths, yet offer distinct realizations of the overall path. The three vehicles (yanas) include:

1. Sravakayana (Hearer vehicle)
2. Pratekyabuddhayana (Solitary Realizer Vehicle)
3. Mahayana or Boddhisattvayana (Greater Vehicle)

As each of the three vehicles outlines the five paths in specific ways, in total there actually are fifteen paths. The first two vehicles (Sravakayana and Paratekyabuddhayana) relate to the Hinayana tradition and the final relates to the Mahayana tradition (as its name states).

The Path of Accumulation

For any of the three vehicles, the beginning of the practice is called the Path of Accumulation. This means that a person possesses a strong desire to overcome suffering, either their own or being willing to help others overcome their suffering. Renunciation of the worldly life is a second important aspect of this stage of the path. When someone possesses these two motivations, it shows a person is on the Path of Accumulation. Each of these two motivations can be seen to relate to whether a person belongs to the two vehicles of the Hinayana or Mahayana. Regarding the motivation to overcome suffering, if someone desires to overcome their own individual suffering they are situated in the Hinayana Path of Accumulation. If someone wishes to help all living beings this determines they are on the Mahayana Path of Accumulation. In relation to the motivation for renunciation, when a person renounces a worldly life for their personal benefit, this would be Hinayana, and if a person renounces a worldly life for the benefit of all living beings this would be Mahayana. To identify oneself as being on the Mahayana Path of



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Accumulation requires that a person possess a Bodhicitta mind (loving-kindness and compassion for all living beings).

The Path of Preparation

According to the Buddhist point of view, suffering is due to a lack of understanding of reality (ignorance). A person is identified as being on the Path of Preparation when they undertake meditation and analysis on the nature of reality primarily through reasoning. The person in the Path of Preparation normally meditates for a limited duration and without complete clarity. Although a person will have an understanding of the concept of the selflessness of the self or of emptiness (sunyata), and be aware that this is necessary to overcome suffering, they will not have direct perception of the selflessness of the self or of emptiness. A person in the Path of Preparation is working towards gaining this direct perception of selflessness of the self or of emptiness (sunyata).

The Path of Seeing

When a person is on the Path of Seeing, s/he will practice profound concentration meditation on the nature of reality and as a result, their direct perception is able to realize the selflessness of the self or emptiness (sunyata). When this occurs this indicates that he or she is on the Path of Seeing. When one has completed the Path of Seeing, he or she will be freed from Samsara (the cycle of suffering). This means they have achieved the realization of selflessness or the realization of the interdependent origination of emptiness, and experience no more negative emotions because there is an understanding of the nature of reality.

It is important to note that from the point of view of the first two vehicles (belonging to Hinayana), ignorance is the root of suffering and there are two forms of ignorance:

1. the intellectual grasping of the self, and
2. the innate grasping of the self.

The intellectual grasping of the self would include factors relating for example to culture or the environment that cause misunderstandings or false perceptions. Innate grasping of the self is not related to culture, environment or external influences, but arise solely from deep, internal habituation, which all sentient beings possess. An example to help explain the difference in purifying these two forms of ignorance would be to compare it to washing your clothes. Cleaning out coarse dirt from your clothing is like purifying the intellectual grasping of the self and cleaning subtle stains are comparable to purifying the innate grasping of the self. Although, after the Path of Seeing, the intellectual grasping of the self (coarse dirt) has been purified, the innate grasping of the self (subtle stains) will be reduced, yet remains. This is why the Path of Meditation is important to purify ignorance relating to the innate grasping of the self to achieve the Path of No More Learning.

From the Mahayana point of view, the intellectual and innate grasping of the self also cause suffering, but are understood to be coarse level of ignorance. In Mahayana, the root of suffering is seen to be the belief that the self and other phenomena inherently exist, which is a more subtle form of ignorance. Within the Path of Seeing, an understanding of emptiness is gained which



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reduces the idea that the self or other phenomena exist independently, and the coarse level of delusions are cleansed. Within Mahayana, it is asserted that wisdom is insufficient to purify the subtle imprints of delusion, which require the additional element of Bodhi mind together with various degrees of wisdom to reach levels much more profound than achieved in the Path of Seeing.

The Path of Meditation

It is only after a person has completed the Path of Seeing and purified the intellectual grasping of the self and perceives the interdependent origination of emptiness that one can begin to purify the innate forms of ignorance (innate grasping of the self and subtle imprints of delusion).

For the two Hinayana vehicles, the direct perception of the selflessness of the self will foster increased wisdom with a motivation to overcome suffering, which when practiced repeatedly will reduce the innate grasping of the self until it is completely purified. This is the Path of Meditation, after which they have fully overcome suffering and reach Nirvana and enter the Path of No More Learning.

For the Mahayana path, the Path of Meditation is divided into ten steps to purify the innate grasping of the self, ignorance, and imprints of delusion. In the Path of Meditation, the practitioner is cultivating wisdom combined with Bodhicitta mind, which becomes increasingly powerful as one proceeds along the ten steps. It is possible to achieve ten different levels of wisdom, which are the antidote to ten levels of ignorance. It is as though there are shadows in a room and when each of ten lights is turned on, the room becomes brighter and brighter. After the ten lights are all turned on, no more darkness remains. At this time, a person has purified all subtle imprints of delusion and has arrived at the Path of No More Learning.

At this point, you may be asking where Tantra fits in this process. The tenth level of wisdom can not be achieved through an understanding of emptiness and Bodhicitta alone. The tenth level of ignorance requires the most subtle, pure consciousness to penetrate sufficiently to purify the most subtle imprints of delusion. It is Tantric practice which offers access to the most subtle, pure consciousness.

The Path of No More Learning

The Path of No More Learning is when a person has purified all ignorance, delusions, and imprints of delusions. A person in this path is all knowing. This stage is called Enlightenment.



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*We seek your blessings to actualize, in this life, the path of unity,
Of clear light and illusory body which arise from placing your feet
Our protector, at the very center of the central channel and
The eight petalled lotus at your heart.*

INTRODUCTION TO TANTRA

Buddhist Tantra is the most advanced level practice in Buddhism. There are numerous differences between Sutrayana and Tantra, where Tantra emphasizes the use of very subtle energies of the mind, of wind, and of the channels. Generally speaking, there are four enlightened qualities in Tantra, which include: the environment, body, objects, and deeds. Because the practice of these qualities exist only in Tantra, this creates a key distinction between Tantra and Sutra.

For example in Tantra:

The environment consists of a mandala

The body involves deity yoga

Objects means being surrounded by dakas, dakinis and other enlightened qualities

Deeds are the activities

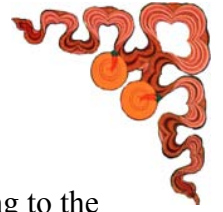
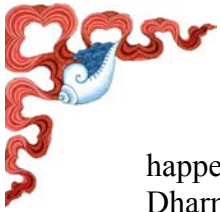
There are four types of Tantra:

1. Performance Tantra
2. Action Tantra
3. Yoga Tantra
4. Highest Yoga Tantra

These four types of Tantra are differentiated by how each use attachment as part of the Path. In Tantra, negative emotions, such as attachment and anger, are still seen as negative (like in Mahayana and Hinayana) and yet, these emotions are also seen as offering a great opportunity on the Path to Enlightenment. When a practitioner has sufficient skills, working with these negative emotions are seen as a valuable method to reach enlightenment.

Enlightened qualities can be described many different ways, one of which includes the truth body (Dharmakaya), enjoyment body (Sambhogakaya), and emanation body (Nirmanakaya). In yoga and especially in highest yoga tantra there are numerous practices for achieving the three kayas. There are three stages of the three kayas, which include the foundation, the path, and the result. We all possess internal resources to practice the three kayas, and one of the practices utilizes the death and dying, bardo, and rebirth process. This cycle of reincarnation is one which Buddhists believe all human beings will pass through and offers a powerful opportunity for practice. The three kayas relate to the three stages of this cycle, with death and dying process being Dharmakaya; the intermediate states being Sambhogakaya; and rebirth is Nirmanakaya.

For example, when a person is doing the practice of deity yoga, before a they see themselves as the deity, they dissolve the elements of themselves into the nature of the mind, which is called the death process meditation. The actual death process is imagined as though it were actually



happening and the subtle consciousness dissolves into clear light, which is the path of Dharmakaya. From this point, there is a process where light or a Sanskrit syllable (relating to the deity of the practice) will arise from the Dharmakaya. This is the Bardo stage, the path of Sambhogakaya. Which syllable or light it is will depend on which deity yoga you are practicing, and the syllable or light will dissolve and transform into the deity, who arises from that which is dissolving. This comprises rebirth and is the path of Nirmanakaya. The result of the three kayas is the realization of enlightened qualities: the truth body or Dharmakaya, enjoyment body or Sambhogakaya, and the emanation body or Nirmanakaya.

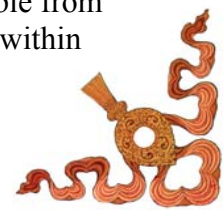
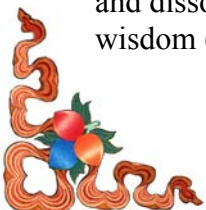
Stages of the Tantric Path

Before beginning Tantra a person must understand and undertake the common Buddhist practices, which are described in the Lam Rim (Stages of the Path to Enlightenment). A person should have a profound practice of renunciation, a clear understanding of Bodhicitta, and be willing to take the vows of Tantra. For example, if someone begins the Tantric practice of deity yoga, they should receive the initiation for that deity. Before the initiation, the person should have received the Tantric vows. To receive the tantric vows, a person must take the Bodhisattva vows. Before taking the Bodhisattva vows, a person should either take the lay vows or the monks and nuns vows. These are the steps (in reverse) that need to be taken to enter the Tantric Path.

If you wish to practice Tantra, it is essential to find a guru (teacher). The teacher is required for you to receive an initiation. First, you need to identify the deity yoga you would like to practice and then identify a teacher who has an unbroken lineage in that practice. After you receive the initiation of the deity, there are two distinct levels of practice relating to the deity. The first level is called the generation stage and the second is the completion stage of practice

The generation stage is the path of the three kayas, which were mentioned earlier. In this stage, through strong concentration, you are imagining yourself as a deity within a mandala, and visualizing yourself as the deity in a process of the three kayas (death and dying, bardo, and rebirth). This stage is called generation stage. The generation stage also comprises two mental stages. In the beginning a person will imagine the deity and mandala, and gradually over time will begin to visualize this image vividly for hours, with no interruption in the thoughts. When a person can sustain this degree of detail for three hours, in combination with the common practices (loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom) you are in the coarse level of the generation stage. Then when a person is able to reduce the mandala and deity to a miniscule size, while sustaining full details for three hours, you have achieved the subtle practice of generation stage. In the subtle practice of generation stage, a person is ready to move on to the second stage, which is the completion stage.

Whereas in the generation stage a person is practicing deity yoga and visualizing the energy flowing in the central channel accompanied by inner bliss and wisdom, in the completion stage, the subtle air actually enters the central channel (no longer merely visualization). The two nostrils gradually stop and the central channel fully opens, with the air remaining in the central channel and dissolving into the central channel. The tremendous inner bliss generated is inseparable from wisdom (emptiness/sunyata) and arises spontaneously. The air itself arises and dissolves within



the central channel, and simultaneously, the inseparable union of inner bliss and wisdom are sustained over a long period of time.

Whereas the generation stage is divided into two levels, the completion stage is divided into six levels¹, which include dissolving the body, dissolving the speech, dissolving the mind, realizing the illusory body, realizing clear light, and union. Where a person finds themselves in relation to the first five levels (body, speech, mind, illusory body, and clear light) is dependent on the degree of openness of the chakras and channels. As the energy within a person reaches deeper and more profound levels, and as the channels open further, inner bliss and wisdom become increasingly powerful. The final stage, union, identifies that the completion stage is fully realized, and a person has achieved the level of Vajradhara, full Enlightenment.



Vajradhara with Consort

¹ Some traditions will unite the dissolution of body and speech, which totals five levels. Here we are dividing into six levels.



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“We seek your blessing to cleanse all stains of ordinary appearances and grasping through the first stage yoga of transforming birth, death, and bardo into the three bodies of Buddha, so that whatever may appear arises as the body of a Yiddam.”

By Great Master Panchen Lama Losang Chö Gyen

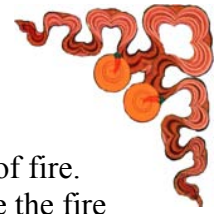
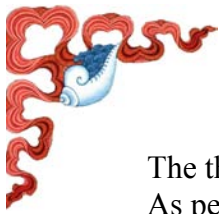
DEATH AND DYING

Normally, an individual achieves enlightenment after many eons, but a human rebirth offers the precious human body with a mind and chakra system that can be used to achieve enlightenment in one human lifetime. The Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism has as its goal to achieve enlightenment in one lifetime, and to realize this it is very important to understand the mind, and especially the nature of the mind. Among Tibetan Buddhists, each tradition uses different names to refer to the nature of the mind, including Kundutzangpo, Rikpa, or Clear Light, among others. All of these names, however, refer to the subtlest consciousness and the question is how to bring this subtle consciousness or Rikpa to life and sustain it.

However, there are few occasions in a human life when we can access the nature of the mind and these include: when we sneeze, when we faint (become unconscious), during orgasm, and finally with death and dying. During these times, our subtle consciousness awakens. However, some of these occasions, such as sneezing, are too short for us to take advantage of, while others require significant training to become useful to our practice. In Vajrayana or Tantra, the tantric practitioners strive to awaken the nature of the mind and sustain it in their lives. The best training for this is meditation on death and dying, and for this reason death and dying is a very important subject in Buddhist Tantra. For this reason, I will briefly explain what happens in the death and dying process and its role in realizing the nature of the mind.

During a person’s death, the elements dissolve and their senses grow weaker and their breathing changes. Some physical signs of death can be observed from outside, whereas others are only discernible to the dying person. Among the five aggregates, form is the most coarse level of the aggregates. For this reason, form is the first aggregate to dissolve, which occurs at the same time as the earth element dissolves. In this stage, the body becomes weak and limp (we have no control or strength to move our body). A person becomes less able to lift or move their head, with it becoming increasingly difficult to turn their head to the left or right. Then, the person has the feeling that they are sinking and their vision becomes cloudy. Facial changes also begin to take place, with the person growing pale. These are the signs that form is dissolving and that earth is dissolving into water.

The second aggregate to dissolve is feeling, which dissolves together with the element water. The three types of feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings) disappear. For example, if we pinch the dying person at this time, they will not feel any pain. The element water dissolves into fire, and the body fluids (blood, etc.) become very thin. At this time, the sense of hearing begins to disappear. The person will have a very smokey feeling or vision in their mind.



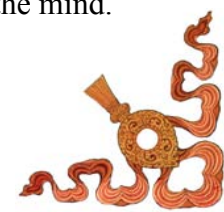
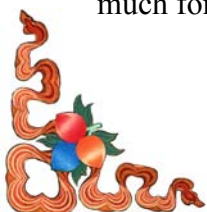
The third aggregate to dissolve is perception, which dissolves together with the element of fire. As perception dissolves, the dying person can no longer identify any object. And because the fire element is dissolving, the person becomes increasingly weak until they are no longer with us. When the fire element is dissolved from the person, the body is no longer warm (all body heat has disappeared) and the body becomes cold to the touch. The dying person loses all sense of smell. Inhalation becomes very weak and shallow while exhalation lasts longer and becomes stronger. Within the mind there will be a feeling or vision resembling a red sunset.

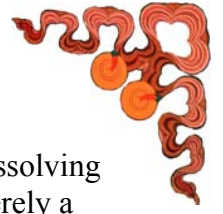
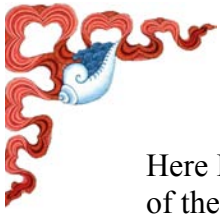
The fourth aggregate to dissolve is formation, which dissolves together with air. There is no longer any movement in the person's body and breath stops completely. There is no longer any breath entering or leaving through the nostrils. Although air no longer flows in or out the nostrils, there is still air flowing in the channels, and at this time air enters the central channel. Without training, there is no conscious awareness that air has entered the central channel. By this time, the sense of taste has completely vanished and we can see that the person's tongue turns blue. The sense of touch also no longer exists. Normally, a doctor or nurse will declare the person to be clinically dead at this time, because the heart has also stopped. However, in the Buddhist tradition, the person is not considered to be dead yet because consciousness is still in the body. There are four stages that the body will continue to experience after this point.

According to the Buddhist tradition, when the heart stops the coarsest level of consciousness (feelings, senses, and convention level of thoughts) completely dissolves. After this coarse level of consciousness dissolves, four levels of subtle consciousness remain and as we go deeper and deeper, consciousness becomes increasingly pure. The most pure level of consciousness is reached at the moment when the consciousness is leaving the body and enters the bardo state (intermediate stage), which comes before rebirth. It is important to note that not all beings have an intermediate stage, for it depends on the nature of the rebirth that the person will achieve.

If the person will be reborn as a human, the intermediate stage will comprise a very subtle form with a body resembling a human being. The sense of time in bardo is very different from human time. Within 49 days (human time) this subtle consciousness will find new parents, and the parents that are selected will depend on the karma and conditions of the previous life. When the consciousness enters the mother's womb, the bardo stage (intermediate stage) stops. Right before entering the womb, if the consciousness of the bardo form feels an attraction to the mother, it will become a male child. If the form feels attraction to the father, will become a girl. If the child is equally attracted to the mother and father, the child will be androgynous, bisexual, or hermaphroditic. After 9 months, the baby will be born. These three states, death and dying, intermediate stage (bardo), and rebirth, are used as a foundation for meditation.

Death and dying meditation is extremely important to gain an understanding of the nature of the mind. After receiving the initiation and full instructions on deity yoga, the three kayas and the death and dying process, the meditator will imagine the air entering the central channel as the clear light awakens. The clear light combines with inner bliss together with the understanding of emptiness, and this is called Dharmakaya. To achieve this, death and dying meditation is very important in the first stages in Tantra. For this reason, there are extensive texts and teachings on the death and dying process in the Vajrayana tradition. The death and dying process is not used as much for understanding the nature of impermanence, as it is to understand the nature of the mind.





Here I have provided a brief explanation of the death and dying process, including the dissolving of the aggregates, the elements, and the accompanying visions and sensations. This is merely a brief summary of the vast information and teachings on death and dying.

Finally, I wish all sentient beings will understand how to achieve clear light and overcome suffering. I wish all living beings achieve inner bliss.





INTRODUCTION TO THE BUDDHIST PATH DZOGCHEN

I

Darkness accumulated over thousands of kalpas, just as the whole mass of such darkness is dispelled by a single lamp, likewise a single moment of luminosity of your mind dispels ignorance and all evil deeds and obscurations accumulated over kalpas. Taught by the Great Master Tilopa to Naropa, and composed by Naropa on the banks of the River Ganges after he passed through the 12 hardships.

II

Alas! Our mind – that is to say, that which is sometimes clear awareness, sometimes gloomy turmoil – arose at the very beginning simultaneously with Kuntuzangpo. Kuntuzangpo, knowing everything to be him/herself, is free. We sentient beings, through not knowing it, wander in endless samsara. Countless times we have taken different forms in the six realms, but all that we have done has been meaningless.

*Now, for once out of hundreds of times, we have obtained a human body. Unless we put into action the means for avoiding rebirth in the inferior realms of samsara, once dead where we will be reborn is uncertain; and wherever we might take birth in the six classes of beings there is nothing beyond suffering. To have obtained a human body is not enough by itself. Since the time of death is uncertain, we must practice Dharma genuinely right now. At the time of death, we should, like Jetsun Mila, feel no regret or self-reproach. As he said: “The Dharma tradition of myself, Milarepa, is such that one is not ashamed of oneself.” By Jigdral Yeshey Dorje, in *Extracting the Quintessence of Accomplishment* (p. 4)*

III

So, if you pray with simple and very fervent devotion, after some time, through the transfer of the Heart-Mind realization of the Guru, an extraordinary understanding, inexpressible in words, will certainly take birth from within. Jigdral Yeshey Dorje, (p 12)

IV

Therefore, the birth of understanding in your nature of the meaning of the Great Perfection depends upon these preliminaries. That was what Je-Drigung meant when he said, “Other teachings consider the main practice profound, but here it is the preliminary practices that we consider profound.” Jigdral Yeshey Dorje, (p 14)

V

Without straying from the firmness of view, remain free, releasing all the perceptions of the five sense-doors in their natural state. Do not meditate on particulars, thinking “this is this, this is that.” If you “meditate” that is the intellect. There is nothing to be meditated upon. Do not let yourself be distracted even for an instant. If you wander from dwelling in awareness itself, that is the real delusion, so do not be distracted. Whatever thoughts arise, let them arise. Do not follow them, do not obstruct them. You may ask “then what should be done?” Whatever the manifestation of the phenomenal world may arise, remain in the state of natural freshness, without grasping at them, like a small child looking inside a temple. If you do so, all phenomena



INTRODUCTION TO THE BUDDHIST PATH DZOGCHEN



remain in their own place, their aspect is not modified, their color does not change, their luster does not vanish. Although the phenomenal world is present, if you do not contaminate it by wanting and clinging, all appearances and thoughts will arise as the naked primordial wisdom of the radiant void. Jigdral Yeshey Dorje, (p 16-18)

VI

At first, liberation of thoughts through their recognition is like meeting someone you already know. In the middle, self-liberation of thoughts is like the undoing of a snake's knot. Finally, liberation of thoughts which cause neither benefit nor harm is like a thief in an empty house. Jigdral Yeshey Dorje, (p 26)

If you recognize the nature of these undesirable thoughts with awareness, at that very moment they will be liberated by themselves, like a snake untying its knot. Jigdral Yeshey Dorje, (p 22)

VII

*In the cemetery of one's body, the king of places,
let the yogi of mind be in the state of the innate.*

*Pure like a crystal is the mind.
Mind has neither defects nor qualities.
Upon engaging with the variety of objects,
it is smeared with the defects of samsara.*

*A tree grows leaves and branches. Severing one root makes its hundreds of thousands of branches wither, likewise the branches of samsara, when the root of mind is severed.
Great Indian Master Naropa, composed on the banks of the River Ganges*

Dedication

Masam jurme sherab paru chin
Magye megak namkye ngopo ni
Sosor rangrik yeshe chuyu wa
Tusum gyalwe yumla chaktsal lo

*Homage to the Mother of the Three Times, Conquerors
That which is behind the word, thoughts and experiences, the perfection of wisdom
That which is non-arising and non-causing, the very essence of space
That which is self-awareness, the object of primordial wisdom. The Buddha*

