

Dharani - associating with perfection

Vajrayana Buddhism sees its activity as falling into three areas — physical, verbal and mental — and considers mantra to be the quintessence not only of all its verbal practices but also of speech in general. Speech, in this context, has a very broad meaning, covering all aspects of communication and expression. Another, and older, word for mantra is *dharani*. Commonly viewed as formulae or spells for overcoming obstacles or for mastering certain forces, these have been part of Buddhism since its earliest days. They are found in Theravada Buddhism and are one of the eighty powers a bodhisattva must acquire to attain buddhahood.

Dharani

The associative process is a very powerful factor of everyday life. One only needs to consider the strong emotions which are stirred up when a patriotic person hears the national anthem or the powerful memories which flood to the front of the mind when looking at old family photos or smelling a long-forgotten fragrance. These associations happen with lightning speed and considerable complexity, as proven by the use of split-second images in subliminal publicity. Dharani harnesses and transforms the associative process.

Meditations based on mantra and dharani progressively and intentionally disempower the haphazard associative patterns that have built up, over a lifetime, in an individual: the fabric of family, culture, education, politics, nationality and the like. Instead of remaining the puppet of their conditioning, as is the case for most people, the person learns how to become the puppeteer, carefully choosing the imagery that furnishes the mind. The new psyche can be filled with compassion, gentle wisdom, patience, generosity, self-control, kindness and mindfulness and all the evocative Buddhist symbols associated with such qualities. A new stream of imagery, both conscious and sub-conscious, will gradually set tranquil confidence in the place of neurosis and wisdom in the place of confusion.

Dharani is a vital part of the mental training which accomplishes this mental renaissance. Whatever specific skills of compassion, areas of knowledge and meditative experiences one acquires are systematically associated with the dharani: either with its uttered sounds or with its written syllables,

known as seed syllables. As a result, whatever has been linked to the syllable will spring to mind whenever it is evoked.

The new, structured and (above all) wished-for networks created in the mind are made particularly potent through the sacred syllables of the dharani. Ordinary mnemotechnics may be relatively effective for enhancing memory but their scope is limited: they can only organise everyday conceptual information. The same is somewhat true for hermeneutic devices, such as repeating 'I am strong, I can cope' until one identifies with a stronger persona.

Buddhists believe that using the holy dharani syllables as mnemonic keys is far more powerful than these intellectual devices, because it makes a profound link with the sacred. It connects the intelligence that one is acquiring today with the vast wisdom of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. The syllables of the dharani are paving stones laid by the Buddhas, drawing one along a path of purity and into their space. There, the depth of enlightened understanding can, to a certain degree, illuminate a person through the power of interdependence created by the dharani. Thus it can bring one to drink rapidly from the fountainhead of their wisdom or to benefit from their inestimable protective power.

The important bodhisattva manual — the Bodhisattva Levels (*bodhisattvabhumi*) — gives four classes of dharani:

- C those used for studying the dharma
- C those connected with meanings
- C mantras (see below) and
- C those for the acquisition of forbearance.

One of the earliest and most commonly used dharani was the recitation of the Sanskrit alphabet. Considered a divine language and the basis for all mantras and dharani, its letters were also used as a study index, in times when few people had access to manuscripts and when whole sections of text were learnt by heart. Also commonly recited as dharani were simple praises to the three Refuges, such as

namo buddha, namo dharma, namo samgha

hail to the Buddha, hail to the dharma, hail to the samgha

used to trigger all the teachings received on these three and to recall their qualities, as is required by the refuge commitment and sought after in the 'mindfulness of the refuges' contemplations.

Prayer in Buddhism

In Buddhism, prayer is not primarily a supplication addressed to an external deity but a way of training the mind, through repeating heartfelt ideas. This harnesses the spoken word to useful purpose and reduces the useless chatter of the habitual mental monologue. Nevertheless, many Buddhist prayers do appear, at face value, to be supplications to an external entity and this can seem questionable in the light of Buddhism's non-theism. The answer is simple yet profound. Ultimately there is no external entity. But relatively, for as long as one is divorced from innate perfection, the latter remains something 'other' than everyday confusion and great value comes from recognising the great gulf between these two.

Both prayer and dharani reshape the mind and bring it into focus. Prayers have the disadvantage of being wordy and being the expression of distinct chains of thought. Dharani, triggering lightning associations, are less rational and more spontaneous. By freeing the mind from its preoccupation with slowly lumbering thoughts, they allow it to be open in a more intuitive way to what is known as the 'blessing' of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, i.e. the presence of higher wisdom.

Mantra - the power of naming

Mantra is dharani used for evocation, either of mortal worldly deities or of immortal, timeless realities. The magic of linking names with objects must have fascinated humankind ever since language began. The notion of invoking a force by uttering its name — or, better, its secret name — has been current in cultures all over the world for many thousands of years. Some of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Digha-Nikaya* and the *Ratana Sutta* contain 'prayers for safety' (*parittas*), chanted to protect meditators from non-human spirits or from the perils of snakes and wild animals in the jungle, while absorbed in contemplation.

Even a dangerous dog can lovingly protect its master and friends. Although their conduct may not always be ideally Buddhist, many local gods, spirits or even demons are believed to protect meditators as individuals and the Buddhist faith in general. Their help is summoned by performing the relevant ritual and reciting their secret names, embodied in their mantras. The secret name is imparted only to those responsible enough to use it, through a ceremony of initiation and empowerment. The fact that only enlightened masters and their morally-responsible followers know and use this name is seen as preserving an area of spirituality which remains purely beneficent and altruistic: a psychic territory unmarred by the misuse of power so common in the ordinary world and in egocentric magic.

Some mantras have, by contrast, been made very public. All over Tibet and the Himalayan region one encounters the *Om Mani Padme Hung* mantra carved onto rocks. In Eastern Tibet there is a famous wall of Mani stones, 1½ kilometres long, initiated by Patrul Rinpoche in the nineteenth century. The Kalachakra mantra, with its beautifully interwoven letters reminiscent of Arabian calligraphy, is often seen on buildings or on amulets (*gau*) and is widely used as a barrier to deflect negative energies. The *Om Ah Hung Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hung* mantra of Padmasambhava has also entered the public domain. These mantras, and those of the female bodhisattva Tara and the male Manjusri, are frequently found on prayer flags. The *Om Padmo Usnisa Vimalay Hung Pay* mantra is placed over door lintels to protect and bless those who pass through them.

Mantra is not restricted to invoking protection. It is a vital part of vajrayana ritual, a discovery of the

speech aspect of Buddha. Its recitation is used as a means for keeping the meditator one-pointedly in the presence of the particular Buddha or bodhisattva upon which he or she is concentrating. Uttered with subtly-controlled lucidity in a sublime passion, Buddha's name throws open the doors of faith and leads the mind into direct experience. The banal counterpart of this mechanism would be the joyful sweetness and closeness a lover feels when closing the eyes and murmuring the sweetheart's name.

Mantras are an integral part of vajrayana. Their use became more widespread in Buddhism as vajrayana became integrated into monasticism. If the bodhisattva path of mahayana Buddhism is like a medicinal plant, then vajrayana mantra is like the essential oil distilled from that plant. One could even extend the analogy and consider it as being like the genetic code of that plant's active ingredient. The *Om Mani Padme Hung* mantra, explained in the following pages, is a good example of the way in which each syllable of a mantra becomes a key, opening a doorway to many aspects of mahayana Buddhism: the teachings on the six dimensions of existence, the five primordial wisdoms, the six paramita and so on and so forth. As mantras represent the quintessence of the teachings rather than an elaborated form, their translations make little sense. For this reason, their real meaning is a hermetic secret not to be found in their literal translation, even though their syllables often combine to make Sanskrit words. The Mani mantra, for instance, gives *Om*, *Jewel in Lotus*, *Hung* when translated.

The recitation of mantra is accompanied by the turning of beads. Early Buddhist set themselves goals of certain numbers of mantras to be recited — one hundred thousand, a million, ten million — and counted them using differently coloured stones as an unmounted abacus. This developed into the use of large seeds, which were then strung into a sort of rosary known as a *mala*. A mala has 108 beads and often has two small counters attached, each with ten metal rings: to count the number of whole *mala* recited (i.e. up to 1080 mantras) and the other to count tens of these. The beads are held by the left hand, which draws them in to the hand, one by one, one for each mantra, rotating each bead clockwise. Mala are often made of bodhi-tree seeds, lotus seeds or fragrant woods. Some people use mala of precious stones, the colour of which corresponds to that of their tutelary Buddha.