

# Vajrayana - the pathless path

## Problems with Paths

The notion of following a spiritual 'path' is very commonplace in Buddhism. The general idea is that one starts out with a limited mind, filled with confused and very concrete ideas about reality. Having become Buddhist, one follows a path of meditation practice and intellectual refinement which leads to the land of direct wisdom. There, the light of pure awareness dispels the darkness of confusion. It replaces concrete, fixed notions reality with a recognition of life being simply a fluid, changing and infinite network of inter-dependence. At the end of the path, one becomes an Arhat or a Buddha, the lucid presence of truth. According to the particular Buddhist path one follows, this journey may be expected to take anything from a few to many cosmic aeons. During that time, life after life, as the mind becomes purer and wiser, the burden of samsara lessens and an immense space of liberation reveals itself. This journey is described at length and in detail in the bodhisattva scriptures, which open up a vision of vast landscapes of spirituality into which even the greatest humans are merely making their first forays.

Vajrayana Buddhism recognises several problems with this otherwise useful notion of *path*. One lies in the implicit difference between the destination and the outset. Going from Stockholm to Bangkok involves changing location but becoming enlightened does not involve going to another world or anywhere else. It starts in mind and ends in mind, with only the internal perceptions of that mind changing. This is why dream is so often used by Buddhists as an analogy. Dreams dominate the same mind that will later awaken to daily consciousness. The mind does not go elsewhere to dream. The difference between sleep and waking is simply a question of confusion or clarity, within the same mind.

Enlightenment is the full discovery of mind's innate perfection. In terms of space and time, it is eternal and all-pervading. Therefore the notion of doing something for thousands of years, in order to find it, is rather like that of setting off on a long ocean voyage in search of salt water.

In hinayana and mahayana Buddhism, one expects to reduce the dark veils of illusions progressively, life after life, and thereby gradually uncover the truth. The vajrayana approach is to illuminate the brilliant searchlight of truth right now. It employs techniques which switch on a light of wisdom so bright and uncompromising that it shines through the veils revealing them starkly for what they are. The idea of a path — “enlightenment later” — poses an obstacle to the immediacy required by such techniques.

Stepping straight into the lucidity of truth cannot be done by just anyone nor can it be done on one's own. It takes the coming together of a person possessing excellent karma and an enlightened lineage master. The disciple also needs a considerable capacity for faith, which will be the key to his or her awakening at the time of initiation (empowerment). The process started by initiation needs to be deepened and consolidated by a considerable period of meditation practice, as most people, even using these powerful vajrayana techniques, need time to be able to adjust their spiritual eyes to the new light.

### **Not a separate philosophy but a means to an end**

Vajrayana is not an additional layer of Buddhist philosophy. The main philosophical traditions differ from each other in four main areas, known as *view*, *meditation*, *conduct* and *fruition*. *View* means the way in which they envisage reality or ultimate truth. *Meditation* is the way in which they lead the mind towards this truth. *Conduct* covers the implications that such a view and meditation have on personal behaviour in the relative world of daily life. *Fruition*, the fourth point, is the maximum result that can emerge from the first three. The point is that the view, meditation, conduct and fruition of vajrayana are *exactly the same as those of mahayana*. It is therefore a special facet of mahayana, different only in the strength and efficacy of its techniques.

### **Being and Becoming**

The various parts of the human psyche are like the runners in modern marathon. Some are victoriously approaching the finishing line while others straggle miles behind, having a difficult time.

The guru's task is to help the disciple recognise the disparity and multiplicity within the human mind and to relate to its components in a radically different way. The doorway to this new way of handling oneself is opened through initiation, described in the Guru and Master chapter (pps ??). Once empowered, the disciple will be working in two areas of meditation, each incorporated into the vajrayana rituals (*sadhana*) practised daily. The first area, called the *ultimate stage*, involves direction recognition of — and then remaining in — the light of absolute truth, the wisdom of voidness. The second, called the *creative stage*, works on a relative level. It employs many different skilful methods for bringing that light of truth into every detail of daily life.

## **The two main phases of vajrayana practice**

The *creative phase* of vajrayana ritual is a radical transformation of the mind and of all five senses.

This is achieved through visualisations, which employ the powerful resources of the imagination in such a way as to transcend habitual ways of relating to oneself and to the surrounding world.

One learns to identify not with the habitual image of personality but with the buddha within. One learns also to relate to an innate purity in the world and in other beings, by seeing them as buddhas in pure realms. Vajrayana ritual, known as *sadhana*, has a very theatrical side to it, inasmuch as it is a total immersion into another identity. The theatre itself is the parallel reality of the buddha mandala, which is not another place but our world viewed very differently through eyes of purity. In order to immerse the disciple in this other way of seeing reality, the *sadhana* employs all sorts of skilful means, such as visual mandalas, physical mudras and postures, ritual music and so forth. Each elaborate stage of *sadhana* reflects the steps of the Buddhist journey from illusion to wisdom but, unlike the notion of path elsewhere in Buddhism, this journey is viewed from the mature perspective of the destination rather than from the naivety of an early wayside halt.

The *sadhana* usually starts with an immediate reminder of voidness as one lets the habitual world dissolve completely. From the pure vast expanse of voidness commences the mental journey of prayer and meditation. Before hosts of buddhas and bodhisattvas, imagined as filling space before one, the refuge vows are taken, along with the bodhisattva promise to attain enlightenment in order to benefit all beings. Throughout this and the other creative phases of the *sadhana*, the mind is held focussed upon a series of detailed visualisations, rather like a mental film. This makes for a dynamic form of concentration meditation which always has meaningful symbols as its object. This not only trains the mind in concentration but also gradually replaces the habitual wallpaper of thoughts and memories with a panoply of wholesome subconscious imagery.

In some traditions one enters the buddha mandala step by step, in a special process of induction which starts with the mandala being a simple creation of the imagination. This then opens up and links into the real, universal, buddha mandala, hidden in the depths of mind, by a process of invitation and invocation. In a third stage, the enlightened presence comes to reside in one's consciousness, much as an honoured guest visits a humble dwelling and is received with respect and

honour. In other traditions, the appearance of the buddha mandala is not gradual but immediate, rather like suddenly awakening to it from the dream of everyday life.

The various stages of practice of a sadhana have the traditional three aspects of body, speech and mind, intended to remedy past bad karma that one has created in these three areas. Many physical actions, such as prostrating to the mandala, sitting in the vajra posture, making symbolic hand gestures (*mudra*) and so forth, are performed, either really or in the imagination but always with a loving, altruistic mind. This heals the damage done to the mind by former negative, egotistic physical actions. Likewise the meaningful prayers and concentrated, repeated formulae (*mantra*) which one recites heal the wounds of past negative speech. The wholesome thoughts, identification with non-dualistic buddhahood and the manifold other aspects of meditation are all destined to repair the mind. At one and the same time as counteracting the negative, these actions draw one closer into harmony with the enlightened body, speech and mind of the buddhas, rather like shaking off the dark images of a bad dream to awaken to a bright new day.

This creative stage of sadhana is nothing less than the creation of a new identity, with which one can relate to the world in a more transparent and non-dualistic way. It creates the basis upon which develops the enlightened (dharmakaya) wisdom which knows each and every thing for what it really is, without the slightest subjective interpretation.

The ultimate stage of the sadhana leaves aside this process of transforming relative reality and turns the mind inwards, towards its own ultimate nature. Mind looks into mind, with great stillness and precision, until the truth about mind is fully discovered. This truth will eventually be found to be an infinite voidness and profound bliss of omniscience. The disciple refines this phase of the practice through special meditation instructions given by the guru as well as by special yogic exercises which aid the mind to progress swiftly by mastering the effect that biological processes have on it. Such meditation forms the basis for (dharmadhatu) wisdom which knows the one essence of all things.

## **The Five Buddha Families**

These represent five categories of beings, with their five main potentials. The members of each category have their typical way of viewing the world and relating to it. Each has a negative side, related to the principal neuroses exhibited by the group, and a positive side, related to this neuroses' counterpoint within enlightenment, which becomes the main potential of the family. The five are called by their Sanskrit names *vajra*, *ratna*, *padma*, *karma* and *buddha*. The vajrayana yogin has to recognise the presence of the five potentials within the mind and transmute them to perfection.

The **vajra** family is named after the vajra sceptre, the invincible, all-defeating weapon of Indra. It has five hard, sharp prongs, representing mastery over the five main mind poisons (ignorance, desire, hostility, pride and jealousy). Vajra types have a potentially sharp intellect, which can analyse clearly and logically the problems of mind and which knows how to view situations from many varying perspectives. Their problem is anger, which manifests when the trenchant intellect is immature and subject to over-rigidity. This character is symbolised by water, which is dangerous and turbulent when troubled yet mirror-like, clear and transparent when calm. The enlightened wisdom which crowns this family is the *mirror-like primordial wisdom*. Its direction is the East. It is the freshness and lucidity of dawn. Its colour is white, sometimes blue. The family is symbolised by the vajra sceptre.

The **ratna** (jewel) family is characterised by abundance, enrichment and expansion. Its weakness, when immature, is in its arrogance and self-infatuation. It tends to over-indulgence, ostentation and preoccupation with the senses. Once transmuted, this self-pre-occupation becomes a generosity which extends itself everywhere, with a power to lend oneself emotionally, mentally and spiritually to all people and all things. This is represented by the element earth, which sustains all life. Crowning this family is the *primordial wisdom of sameness* (equanimity), represented by Buddha Ratnasambhava. Its direction is the South. It is the fullness of midday, and its colour is yellow.

The **padma** (lotus) family is named after the magnificent flower which grows out of mud and slimy water to emerge pure and clean. The mud which is the padma type's weakness is desire: a passionate approach to life and to other people, with an inbuilt need to seduce and be liked. This is self-centred,

not really communicative and driven by a compulsion both to possess and to be identified. As such, it uses anything and everything to its own ends. The transmutation of this self-centredness — the lotus which appears from this muddy confusion — brings a crystal-clear awareness of other (rather than self) and this family is crowned by the *primordial wisdom of discernment*, embodied by Buddha Amitabha. The all-consuming nature of gross passion or discerning clarity is represented by the element fire. Its direction is that of the sunset, the West, and its colour is red. It is symbolised by a jewel.

The **karma** (action) family is engaged in doing, in accomplishing. In its neurotic, or immature, phase, its activity is tainted by jealousy, envy and unhealthy competitiveness. It can also be obsessive about efficiency and finds it hard to accept life's shortcomings (and other people's) as being natural. Many 'perfectionists' and utopians belong to this family, whose members would like to get less efficient people out of their sight and who feel envious of the success and efficiency of others. The transmutation of these weaknesses brings about a mature ability to do all things, calmly and selflessly. This family is crowned by the *all-accomplishing primordial wisdom*, embodied by Buddha Amogasiddhi. Its direction is the North, its element is wind and its colour is green. It is symbolised by a sword.

The **buddha** (awakened) family is composed of those who, in their immature phase, are bound by ignorance. This takes the form of ethical laziness: a taking refuge within the safe confines of a small, familiar world. Its members shy away from taking responsibility either for themselves or for others. Unawareness abounds. Anything outside the safe microcosm may seem too threatening and one would rather not know about it or think about it. The transmutation of this brings a wisdom that is spacious and all-embracing and this family is crowned with *dharmadhatu primordial wisdom*, embodied by Buddha Vairocana. Dharmadhatu is the clear, void space of mind within which all things manifest. The direction is the centre and the element of this family is space and the colour white. It is symbolised by a wheel.

Most people, through their personality traits, belong to one of these families and certain people are

almost their stereotypes. Upon closer inspection, some presence of all families is to be found in almost everyone's mind. The function of vajray-na Buddhism is not to accentuate the problems of these families by inciting people to identify with them even more with them than is usual. It is not the formation of *vajra*, ratna and other clubs or rotaries. It helps people accept themselves for what they are and to concentrate on turning their weaknesses into virtues. It opens the eyes to a recognition of the vast and varying potentials which exist in others, sometimes so dissimilar to oneself. Although the characteristics of these families are quite well catalogued in vajray-na literature, the main insight into these five fundamental natures emerges through meditation, which gives a first-hand appreciation of their primal qualities, much as a good mechanic has a direct feel for engines and can fine-tune them in a way that no novice could do from a textbook.