

Tantra In America

During this series of talks, we have been discussing the future of Buddhism in America and other Western countries; its transmission from Asia, and the focus we would like to see it take in our countries. Since we are approaching the conclusion of the final review of the Buddhist master's study program, which will be complete in 18 courses, and because the three-year retreat is soon to begin, and finally because our students as a group have reached what I think is a critical point in these matters, I would like to address the future of tantra in America.

Why Practice Tantra?

People have asked me if I practice tantra. The answer is "Of course"; and I devote a good part of each day to trying to master a wide range of various tantric texts, arts, and practices. I properly consider it the primary focus of my practice and my life.

In general, the word "tantra" itself means "secret," and normally it should be practiced and taught in a very private way. But because of my role as a public teacher—because so much of what I do is done in the public eye—I think it is necessary for me to discuss openly, in brief, the reason and method for the practice of tantra, especially as I hope to see it develop in West.

The spread of an improper practice of tantra would be a serious blow to the growth of Buddhism in our countries. Equally so, the failure to properly teach and follow the extraordinary methods of tantra would be to deny a real chance for ultimate happiness to thousands of Western people.

We have committed ourselves as Buddhists to ending pain in the world, as quickly as possible. To do so, we must ourselves become enlightened beings. This can be accomplished either by following the "sutra" or open teachings of Buddhism; or it can be done through the practice of secret, or tantric Buddhism.

The standard texts for the sutra method explain that—even after achieving the very high level of real bodhichitta, or the Wish for enlightenment—it took Lord Buddha himself some 200,000 lifetimes more to reach his enlightenment.

Lord Buddha later taught that this process can be reduced to a single lifetime through the proper practice of tantra. If we are serious as Buddhists about ending the suffering that others and we ourselves must endure daily, it is our sworn responsibility to practice tantra, and tantra in its highest and most powerful forms, as quickly as we are able.

The Forms of Tantra

What then are the highest forms of tantra? Tantric practice in general divides into four classes; these are distinguished by going from a greater dependence on outer focus and ritual in the lower classes, up to a greater focus on inward practice in the higher. Within the highest of the four classes of tantra, there are three broad steps of: proper preparation, actual practice, and final goal.

Within the steps of actual practice, there are two important levels: the first in which we undertake to develop a special view of our reality, and the second in which we use this view to work on our subtle spiritual body. This dual process ends in transforming the mind and body into the state of an enlightened being—a state of total knowledge, purity, compassion, and physical perfection.

Work with the subtle spiritual body is itself done in two different ways. These involve a rigorous discipline of practice and study, including intense work with physical channels throughout the body.

I would like to clarify this work with the channels briefly here, since it can so easily be misunderstood. In their current condition, certain subtle channels within our bodies are badly choked; this situation is aggravated every time we have a negative thought, and especially when we have any kind of misperception about the nature of the world around us—about how things really work. This continual choking of the channels is in fact what makes our bodies mortal; it is responsible for the aging process and, unless corrected, eventually leads to our physical deaths.

When we work to fix this condition, we are using our defective physical vessels, in effect, to eliminate themselves—to replace them with the indestructible, perfect form of a tantric deity. This is a painstaking and difficult process, requiring an extensive background in Buddhist philosophy and long hard hours of training. It is about as romantic as cleaning a badly clogged toilet, or cutting open a woman's breast in an operation to remove cancer.

For certain personality types, much of this work is best accomplished through the cooperation of a tantric partner, and in fact we are required by our vows in the highest form of tantra to seek out and undertake this means, in the appropriate circumstances.

Appropriate Practice of Tantra

What are the "appropriate circumstances" for the practice of these higher forms of tantra? One must first of all complete the proper preparation—and, to put it quite bluntly, this is the entire goal of the 18 courses of our Institute. Aside from study one must internally have developed a true wish to escape from the inevitable

suffering of this life—a genuine wish to use the holy Buddhist dharma to escape from a world which is either pain already or pain waiting to happen: the gradual decay of our bodies and our minds; the loss of everything we have ever worked for; and being torn in the end from everyone we have ever loved.

We must as well have come to see that this suffering will not end with death. Whatever brought us here once can and will bring us here again—there is not a single compelling proof that the mind does not continue on after the functions of your physical body have ended. There are thousands of states of conscious life, from insect to human, which are obvious to us. There are millions more that are not obvious to us. At the moment of death there are literally millions of forms of consciousness we can be thrown into, almost all of them simple chaos and terror. We cannot practice tantra—we cannot reach total happiness—in any state of mind other than the one we are currently in, and we must lose it soon.

We must die. We must go on. It could happen any moment of our lives. We must practice tantra, and we must do so now. We must also be resolved to practice it in the most powerful ways within our capacity; we may not have enough time to follow lesser paths.

Consider finally the fact that a tantric disciple who succeeds in this practice becomes, in one fell swoop, a person who can simultaneously reach out to thousands of other suffering people and guide them away from pain.

Tantra is at present taught in many forms. There are false and very filthy practices, many of which are simply common copulation with a glorified name, that are being taught and spoken about without any authority whatsoever in various "new age" schools and the like.

There are also "public" forms of tantric initiations and teachings, where eminent masters such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama have conveyed the broad principles of tantra to large groups of people, in order to plant a powerful seed in them for secret tantric practices in the future—as well as to combat common misconceptions about tantra. Lastly there are the truly secret empowerments and practices which are transmitted privately to proven disciples by the extraordinary beings known as Tantric Masters.

The Tantric Masters

The success of tantric practice depends solely on the proper guidance of a qualified Tantric Master. These are beings who started out like you and me, and who by their intense efforts have been able to reach a completely different level. They are literally on a higher evolutionary plane, as different from us as a human is from an ant.

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Making contact with these beings—learning from them and having them lead us to ultimate happiness—is in fact very similar to an ant trying to relate to a human. Due to the fact that we ourselves are on a much more primitive plane of being, the process of reaching them is first of all very rare, and secondly an often difficult and trying experience.

Imagine a summer meadow covered with marigolds and green grass; at the edge is a great oak tree. Nestled in one of the boughs of the tree is a great honeycomb.

There is a human lying out under the tree enjoying the day. He sees the honeycomb, and sees an ant scurrying around the roots of the tree, in the dirt. Out of great kindness and care for this single ant, he determines to lead it gently up the entire trunk of the tree, to the sweet honey.

He takes a single blade of grass and begins to nudge the ant, pushing at his behind with the blade of grass. To the ant this is a very disconcerting and frightening experience; but remember we are talking about a special kind of ant. He has some instinct, he has a seed of faith in him that says, "Perhaps something bigger is going on here." So he swallows his fear as best he can and accepts the guidance, with occasional lapses of panic where it all gets a little too high. In the end he gorges himself in the nectar of immortality.

We are just this far away from the level of the Tantric Masters, and to meet them, to learn from them, and be guided by them to total happiness within a single lifetime is just as difficult. Like the ant, our position as a lower form of life prevents us from understanding the actions they do to help us—the pokes they give us on our posteriors.

Due to our own set of past actions and thoughts—due to our own set of karmic imprints coloring and actually creating our reality—we oftentimes see them (especially in beginning) act in a way which we cannot understand or appreciate. This is a common phenomenon in tantra; we should expect it and learn to move on up the tree trunk despite it.

A person may even appear to be a Tantric Master to one disciple, and seem to be an ordinary person to another. For those of you who have studied emptiness, this is also to be expected: we see only what our own level of past good karma allows us to see, and in fact there is nothing "out there" except what our past deeds compel us to see.

Remember the famous story where the great Indian master Asanga is running around town all excited, carrying Maitreya (the future Buddha) on his shoulders in joy, having just gained enough virtue to see him. Everyone in town thinks he's crazy, because all they can see on Asanga's shoulders is an old dog with its rotten guts hanging out.

Potential Abuse of Tantra

This explanation leads us to the question of the potential abuse of tantra: if things are however you see them, then what's to prevent someone from simply deciding on their own that they are ready to practice tantra, when they are not?

There is no authentic lineage of tantra descended from Lord Buddha which does not say that the disciple must be thoroughly trained long before being led into the mandala, or secret world of the Tantric Master. The tantric teachings repeatedly stress that the disciple must be deeply knowledgeable in each step of the open teachings, which are presented in full in our own Institute's courses.

The tantric path is not easy. It requires a great knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, a willingness to work long and hard in retreats and other practices, and unshakable confidence in one's Tantric Master. It should never be undertaken otherwise, since a failure to practice properly—a loss of faith in tantra itself—would set the disciple back many years. This itself would be a grave bad karma for their teacher, who "falls with the student, like one yak tied to another as the first falls off the cliff."

Tantra then is like fire, with a great potential for good if properly used, and a very destructive power if improperly used—whether this improper use be due to the mistakes of insufficiently trained people with good intentions, the carelessness of people who should know better, or even outright abuse by the deluded.

The possibility of such abuse though cannot prevent us from fulfilling the tantric tradition in its highest form, any more than the existence of arsonists implies that we should ban the use of fire. As with fire, abuses can and probably will occur; our goal then must be to establish procedures which will make it unlikely, thus still making the full and proper benefits of tantra available to those who can use it to attain ultimate good within their lives. At this Institute, therefore, we have created a formal policy to assure that students are properly trained before attempting tantric study and practice.

Policy of the Institute

It is therefore the policy of this Institute that tantric teachings will only be granted to students who have successfully completed the entire 18-courses of its Buddhist master's program. These 18 courses are based directly on the five great books of ancient Buddhism, along with the teachings on the Steps of the Path (*lam-rim*), which constitute the Buddhist master (or geshe) course in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. In Tibet, it was a custom for monks to complete their geshe studies in order to qualify for admission to tantric college, and I think this is a wise requirement.

The first 15 courses may be taken optionally by home study (including listening carefully to each tape fully, and completing all homeworks, quizzes, meditation assignments, and final examination); but the final three review courses must be taken either from myself or from one of my directly appointed teachers.

In addition to this requirement, the potential student must be examined by myself to determine whether they have sufficiently developed the inner spiritual qualities of renunciation, compassion, and faith in the teachings and their teacher before receiving these teachings. In some cases, I may require an additional period of study and practice, along with special tasks for serving other people.

Finally, no tantric teachings will be granted to a student who has not actively maintained a 6-time book of vow observation for a period of at least three years.

Authenticity of the Lineage

The tantric teachings have a firm foundation in the word of Lord Buddha, and almost a quarter of the canon of His teachings are dedicated to these methods; that is, some 20,000 pages of the Kangyur. The Tengyur, or collection early Indian commentaries upon the Buddha's own teachings, contains over a thousand texts on tantra. And the Tibetan masters themselves have written well over 50,000 commentaries upon these; more than a thousand such texts have already been input on computer by the Asian Classics Input Project. The tantric tradition as it has come down to us then is real and authentic.

Although I am hesitant personally to state my qualifications for granting tantric initiations and teachings, I would like to list them here, only for the benefit of those who have asked me to; that is, for those who are seriously interested in the possibility of receiving them from myself. I encourage each student of the Institute to be very careful in the selection of their tantric teacher, and tell you quite frankly that I may not be the proper teacher for your own personal needs. It is crucial though that you do seek this teacher out, to find them and to lean with them, as quickly as you are properly able.

My training in the theory of tantra in this life has been accomplished as follows. Over the last 20 years I have received group tantric initiations from: His Holiness the Dalai Lama; from the late Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, senior tutor of the Dalai Lama and holder of the throne of Je Tsongkapa; from Khen Rinpoche Geshe Lobsang Tharchin, former abbot of Sera Mey Tibetan Monastery; and from the late Zong Rinpoche, tantric master of Ganden Tibetan Monastery.

I have received extensive group teachings on tantra over the last 20 years from Khen Rinpoche Geshe Lobsang Tharchin, and more specialized teachings from Geshe Trinley Topgye, abbot of Gyume Tibetan Tantric Monastery. I have received brief

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tantric retreat instructions from the esteemed third incarnation of Pabongka Rinpoche.

Whatever I have been able to do correctly in my tantric practice is due to the blessings of these eminent Lamas; and whatever mistakes I have made, or setbacks I have encountered, have been due to my own failure to follow their instructions. We really are like ants in their hands, and the most common error we can make I think is to react to their words or actions on face value—to misinterpret things when they seem to criticize us unfairly or act in ways that might even seem wrong.

We must rather, to the best of our ant-like capacity, try to discern their higher purposes in guiding us up the tree. It is essential in the practice of tantra, as Je Tsongkapa has so eloquently taught us in the art of interpreting the Buddha's teachings on emptiness, that we rely not on the actual statements of a Lama, but rather on what we determine their true meaning to be, by taking as our ultimate authority our own careful reasoning and direct experience in deciding what is right or wrong for our practice.

I have further received private initiations and practice instructions from some six perfect Tantric Masters over more than 20 years, and it is with their sole sanction and guidance that I undertake my current tantric practice.

How do you meet an authentic Tantric Master? You reel them in with your good deeds, you attract them with your attempts to live a good life, like a bee to honey. This fact, that you must have collected immense amounts of good karma to meet them, can be an important barometer in determining whether you are ready for these teachings, and whether a potential tantric teacher is "for real."

In judging my own heart, I have tried to examine whether I have the necessary amount of good karma to practice and teach these subjects. Again, I list my thoughts on this here only to help those who may be interested in learning with me.

I have memorized an extensive amount of tantric ritual and have translated several hundred pages of tantric commentaries. I've also undertaken over ten full tantric retreats, and practiced tantra daily for more than 20 years. I have spent over 5,000 hours in this lifetime—here in America and at each of the major monasteries of the Gelukpa Tibetan tradition—in classes and debate of the open teachings, under some 12 major Tibetan teachers. I have spent over 30,000 hours in the personal service of my Lamas, in such tasks as cooking, building, or working a corporate job to raise funds for Tibetan monks and monasteries. I have helped save over 100,000 pages of sacred scripture; translated and taught 3,000 pages of open teachings to others in more than a thousand hours of classes, and so on.

I think that whatever qualifications I have to teach and practice tantra, and whatever goals I have ever been able to reach spiritually, are due to these sincere efforts to study, practice, and serve my Lamas and others. If I see the world in a way which is

different from the way that others may, it is precisely because of these efforts—it is the expected result of the Buddhist path itself.

I don't believe that persons who have not expended similar efforts will or could appreciate all the views I am expressing here on the subject of tantra. I offer them only in the hopes that some exceptional disciples with seeds of true faith may be attracted to this path, and with a prayer that—by the power of the truth of these words—others as well may at some future time come under the loving guidance of their own Tantric Master.

Plan for Tantric Teachings

The tantric path is not for everyone, and I do not want to imply in any way that everyone who studies at this Institute should become my tantric student, or even study tantra at all, unless they sincerely wish to do so. I believe our courses are of great benefit for everyone, even for those who do not consider themselves Buddhists, and I encourage you to complete them whatever your future plans.

During the three years that I am in retreat in Arizona, this Institute will continue to hold a constant series of seminar courses. These courses will be held in private homes, in smaller groups, and will be led by our approved teachers. *My primary hope for the three years of my retreat is that each student take this opportunity to complete the entire series of 18 courses.*

We will be supplying each student with a list of the courses which they have successfully completed already. In the case of the partial completion of a course (meaning more than two absences during that course), the entire course will have to be taken again. There are no exceptions to this rule, which is essential for maintaining the unbroken lineage as it has come down to us so purely.

The Future of Tantra in America

I urge each one of you to begin now the process of planning your study schedule for the three years, so that you can complete the courses in time. We will be working with all the interested students over the next few months to try to make sure that the courses you need will each be available at times that work out for you.

During the coming months as well, we will complete the process of offering initiation and ceremonies so that you can take the basic vows that you need in order to become eligible to receive tantric initiations and teachings later.

It is highly desirable, though not absolutely necessary, that you take on some form of the freedom vows, such as the five lifetime commitments for laypeople. You

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must take bodhisattva vows, and we will be offering the proper ceremonies first for committing to the bodhisattva concept, and then to the actual way of life.

These vows all provide a firm foundation for proper tantric practice; every one of the freedom vows—both those for laypeople and for the ordained—and every one of the bodhisattva vows is a perfect preparation and support for every form of tantric practice. The process of watching one's vows carefully throughout the day, by using the 6-time book, directly propels you into the holy secret world, the mandala, of the highest tantric beings.

On certain occasions it may not be physically possible though to satisfy the requirements of two different types of vows, one higher and one lower, in the same place at the same time. In cases like this, we are required to fulfill the higher vows, and forgo the lower for the time being. In such cases we should do so joyfully, without doubt or hesitation. Keeping this rule in mind can also prevent us from making very serious mistakes in attempting to judge the actions of others, who may well be honoring their vows in this way at any given moment.

Those of you who have the opportunity on any occasion in the future to receive any of these vows from our beloved master, Khen Rinpoche Geshe Lobsang Tharchin, must make every effort to do so. He is in my opinion the highest living Lama who can confer upon you the true blessings of the unbroken lineage of both the open and secret teachings.

Once the three-year retreat is concluded, we will begin a proper and gradual process of guiding the students who have qualified first through the theory of tantra from the secret texts, and then through the various visualization practices. From there we will go on to solitary mantra retreats, including such practices as tormas offerings, mandala construction, and fire offerings. For those who have completed the necessary commitments, we will then continue up to work on the inner spiritual body, along with the practices which aid this process, including sacred movement, music, and channel work.

As many of you know. Sera Tibetan Monastery—the source of almost all the precious knowledge we are enjoying now, is divided into two colleges: Sera Mey and Sera Jey. What you may not realize is that there was, until the Chinese invasion, a third college of Sera: the Ngakpa Dratsang, or Sera Tantric College. This college, and almost all its members, were totally wiped out during the loss of Tibet, and it has never been revived. I would like to see us bring the concept back, in our own way, as part of this Institute; I would like to see the tantric teachings take their proper place in an organized program to reach enlightenment in this lifetime.

It is my intention to offer this kind of instruction in small groups, both in Arizona and New York, at different times of the year, in order to accommodate students who live nearer to the east or west coasts—so I don't want anyone to be concerned that they will have to live in one place or another. I also intend, after the three years, to

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continue a full schedule of teaching at least two of our normal-length courses per year in New York, on the traditional open subjects of Buddhism—so I don't want anyone to worry either that they will be expected to study tantra if they don't feel ready to do so yet.

The studies and retreats in Arizona will naturally be much more intense, and require a greater commitment, with commensurate rewards. In either case, your work is cut out for you: it is your decision now, while you have time, to start; and I want to emphasize that it should be done during the next three years—it will be difficult later I think to start additional cycles of tantric training, since they will each require a number of years themselves.

I finally want to remind you that, during the three-year retreat, I will be teaching publicly in Arizona for three weeks at a time, twice a year. So those of you who are especially interested in my particular style of teaching don't have to worry that you will not have a few good classes per year. I will also be accepting messages and questions about your important "life" issues during the retreat, and will respond to them briefly by note through John Stilwell.

John will be directing the Institute in New York during my absence, and will himself be teaching a series of general courses. Winston McCullough, with the help of his wife Andrea and son Kieran, will be moving to Tucson and creating a "headquarters" there for directing the development of the Arizona center, for arranging the teachings on the site, and for accommodating those who may wish to come out during the three-year retreat to do some length of retreat themselves. Venerable Elly van der Pas will be managing the logistics of the three-year retreat on the actual site.

I hope this presentation has provided some clarification of my vision for tantric practice both at the Institute and in the West. In my next talk about the spread of Buddhism in America and other Western countries, I would like to go on to discuss how I think the forms of Buddhism can be successfully adapted to our own times and culture, while still safeguarding ourselves from any loss of the true meaning and intent of these forms. But this is for another night. Thank you so much for coming, and for helping in this holy process, of bringing the sweet nectar of immortality to us Western ants.

This teaching was given at the Asian Classics Institute in New York City by Geshe Michael Roach in 1999, prior to entering three-year retreat. For more information about Courses and Practices taught by Geshe Michael, or to order copies of past teachings, please visit www.world-view.org, or contact the Institute at aci@world-view.org.