

L A M A Y E S H E



EDITED BY JONATHAN LANDAW
FOREWORD BY PHILIP GLASS

INTRODUCTION
to TANTRA

The Transformation of Desire

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INTRODUCTION TO TANTRA

Introduction to Tantra

The Transformation of Desire



Lama Thubten Yeshe

REVISED EDITION

Compiled and edited by

Jonathan Landaw

Foreword by Philip Glass



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THEN THE SWIRLING OCEAN OF TANTRA is crossed through the kindness of the navigator, the vajra holder. Bless me to cherish more than my life the vows and commitments—the root of attainments.” With these inspiring words the First Panchen Lama introduces the practice of tantra in his monumental work *The Lama Chopa (Offering to the Spiritual Guide)*, clearly showing with what high esteem the *Vajrayana* (the “Diamond Vehicle,” in which the practices of tantra are taught) was regarded by the great masters of Tibetan Buddhism. Though these words were written nearly four hundred years ago, this high regard for the practice of tantra remains to this day.

The great Tibetan diaspora is recent history, having begun with the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the early '50s. In the decades that followed, the arrival in the West of many, many living masters of Tibetan Buddhism turned the tragedy of Tibet into an unexpected and spectacular windfall for Western devotees of spiritual discipline.

Tantra was at that time not entirely unknown. The encyclopedic works of Sir Arthur Avalon (*The Serpent Power* and *Tantra*) offered highly technical descriptions of the Bengali system of this meditation practice. These works came complete with colorful drawings of the required visualizations. In addition, numerous books on Kundalini yoga by an equally large number of Hindu teachers and yogis could also be found. There were translations as well of the Chinese Taoist work *The Secret of the Golden Flower* an apparently parallel meditation practice. However, to the novice meditators of the early '70s (and virtually everyone was a novice in the early '70s), these texts raised far more questions than they answered.

It was only with the arrival of the Tibetan lamas, tulkus, and rinpoches in the early '70s that, finally, this first generation of Western practitioners found actual tantric meditators and qualified teachers in their midst. For the Vajrayana is, in fact, the living tradition of the Buddhist tantric system. It was immediately clear that, far from being a theoretical or speculative science, it was a practice clearly, precisely, and completely embodied by these teachers. They would be the “navigators” who would help these young, eager students cross “the swirling ocean of tantra.” The words of the First Panchen Lama were not poetry. For these new practitioners they were prophecy.

Lama Yeshe's *Introduction to Tantra* did not actually appear until 1987. It seems that the first wave of Tibetan teachers (all trained in the monasteries of “old” Tibet) held off for some time before making the subject of tantra publicly available. Perhaps there was some hesitation on their part to offer such a powerful and profound instruction before their Western students had acquired a basic grasp of the more conventional Sutrayana system. This, of course, would be most natural, since instruction in renunciation (the determination to be free), *bodhicitta* (love, compassion), and emptiness (wisdom) traditionally precede initiation into the Vajrayana. And so it was with that first generation of American and European students. When Lama Yeshe's *Introduction* finally appeared, it was like an illumination, a vision both brilliant and generous, for which many people had spent years waiting and preparing.

Rereading it again today, I am thrilled, as if for the first time, by the clarity and directness of his thought. His descriptions of foundation practices and subsequent stages are both essential and complete. I know of no work on tantra that has improved on this one as an entry to the subject.

Over the years I have given away countless copies of this book to interested friends, until, during those times it was not in stock, it could be quite scarce. Now, with this new edition, I will no longer have to search through used and rare bookstores to find a prized copy.

And a new generation of practitioners will discover and benefit from the skillful teaching of Lama Yeshe.

Though I knew Lama Yeshe's work and teachings while he was still alive, it was not my good luck to have known him in the flesh. What a marvelous experience that would have been! Still, thanks to this new edition, his words are still part of our world. To me they ring as clear and true today as they did when I first encountered them more than fifteen years ago. A wonderful legacy for the present and for the future!

Philip Glass

THE MATERIAL that makes up this introduction to the world of Buddhist tantra was compiled from teachings given between 1975 and 1983 by the late Tibetan monk Thubten Yeshe, known affectionately to his many students around the world as Lama Yeshe. When it first appeared in the mid-1980s, *Introduction to Tantra* was one of only a handful of volumes available in English to provide an insider's view of the significance and worldview of Tibetan Buddhism's esoteric practices and confronted a host of misconceptions in the popular imagination. Three decades on from Lama Yeshe's passing, a great deal of detailed and authentic information about Buddhist tantra is now in print, and many more resources are online. Yet Lama's voice still cuts through; he conveys to modern readers the essence and profound meaning of tantra in a singular and remarkable way that has not been superseded. Indeed his words are as vital and necessary today as they were when they first appeared.

Lama Yeshe was born near Lhasa at Tölung in 1935 and from the age of six attended Sera Je Monastery, where he received an extensive spiritual and academic education. After the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959, he completed his education at the Buxaduar refugee camp in northeast India and eventually settled near the Boudhanath stupa outside Kathmandu, Nepal.

It was in Nepal that his contact with Westerners began in earnest, and by 1971 Lama Yeshe and Zopa Rinpoche had founded the Nepalese Mahayana Centre Gompa on Kopan Hill, the site of yearly meditation courses that have attracted an ever-growing number of students. These students were eventually to establish numerous centers where Buddhism could be studied and practiced in the West, and

Lama Yeshe spent the last ten years of his life traveling to these and other centers providing teachings, organizational leadership, and, perhaps most importantly, the inspiration of his own tireless example of benefiting others. Finally, on March 3, 1984, in the Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles—at dawn on the morning of the Tibetan New Year—he succumbed to a serious heart ailment that had been threatening his life for more than twelve years.

The idea for this book arose as early as 1981, when Lama Yeshe said he felt there was a need for a work that would introduce Buddhist tantra to the West in a nontechnical, easy-to-understand way. Even though tantra is considered by the various Tibetan traditions to be the most profound and advanced of all Buddhist teachings, he felt its central message to be simple and clear, and extremely relevant to twentieth century life. As he said on many occasions, the West has discovered how to tap so many powerful sources of energy in nature but still remains largely unaware of the tremendous force, even more powerful than nuclear energy, contained within each one of us. As long as this powerful internal energy lies undiscovered, our life is doomed to remain fragmented and purposeless, and we will continue to fall victim to the mental and emotional pressures so characteristic of our age. The practice of tantra, which is designed to take advantage of this hidden inner resource and utilize it to the maximum extent, offers us the best opportunity to overcome these pressures and transform our lives into the meaningful, integrated whole that we all desire.

According to Lama Yeshe, the practice of tantra is so suitable for the modern West because it is “scientific.” In other words, tantra, far from being a system of dogma to be accepted on faith or authority, is in fact a practical, step-by-step exploration of the human condition leading to self-discovery, and its results are verifiable through our own observations and experience. It is this emphasis on direct experience that should make tantra appealing to the great number of Westerners who have long been disillusioned with paths demanding belief

and blind faith. Furthermore, as the following chapters should make abundantly clear, tantra is a path of joy and affirmation, qualities so sadly lacking in many of the currently depleted forms of what were once powerful spiritual traditions.

In the winter of 1982–83 an editing retreat was held near Cecina, Italy, with the aim of going through the many transcripts of Lama Yeshe's tantric teachings in preparation for their eventual publication. Each member of this retreat focused his or her attention on a teaching or group of teachings related to a particular tantric practice. As part of this process, the editors tried to identify the major introductory themes common to all of Lama Yeshe's teachings on tantra, discovering how these themes were dealt with in the individual teachings. In this way a large body of material was selected from many different sources and loosely arranged according to subject matter, leaving the more detailed explanations of specific practices for separate publication.

The compiler of this present work then edited and rearranged this selected material in an attempt to produce a coherent presentation. The resulting draft was then read to Lama Yeshe in Dharamsala, India, during April 1983, at which time he offered many corrections, additional explanations, and suggestions for the improvement of both tone and subject matter. During that year he also continued to lecture around the world and selections from these lectures—most particularly those given in Pomaia, Italy, and Boulder Creek, California—were edited into the manuscript.

It was my hope that the entire revised manuscript would be checked once again with Lama Yeshe, but this was not to be. For many months after his death my work on the manuscript came to an almost complete halt as I found it extremely difficult to face the task of editing his words while coming to terms with the sad but unalterable fact that I would not be hearing the sweet, laughter-filled voice that uttered these words ever again. Eventually, however, with the kind and extremely patient support of many friends, it was possible

to bring the manuscript to its present state of completion and offer it here.

I cannot make this offering, however, without a few words of apology, or at least of explanation. No one who ever had the experience of listening to Lama Yeshe speak would think it possible to capture in print the extraordinary effect he had on people. Like so many great teachers, what he revealed through his presence itself was the spark that gave his teachings their immense power and effectiveness, much more so than the highly unorthodox and often ungrammatical language that he used. This present selection from his oral teachings—recast in more or less standard English—will therefore most likely strike those readers familiar with Lama Yeshe as a pale imitation of the original. Furthermore, there is no way in which a work such as this can claim to represent Lama Yeshe's definitive views on tantra. As the historical accounts testify concerning Shakyamuni Buddha's original discourses themselves, Lama Yeshe's teachings could be understood on as many different levels as there were listeners. It would therefore be presumptuous to think that any one interpretation of what he taught is the only interpretation possible. All a compiler or editor such as myself can do is listen intently to the lectures or tapes and read the transcripts carefully, and then present as clearly as possible what he hears inwardly while familiarizing himself with the teachings. It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that if someone else had been working from the same tapes and transcripts, a book of very different tone and content would have resulted.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche was referring to this multifaceted quality of Lama Yeshe's teachings when he said, "Most teachers like myself teach only what they themselves know and not so much according to the needs of the people. But for Lama, whenever he gave teachings nothing was fixed; he didn't just talk about one subject. In the audience there would be people with various problems—spiritual problems, personal problems, family problems—and Lama would

speak to all of them. And so, after a one-hour talk from Lama, everybody would have received some answer to their problems. In the beginning some might have come just to see how a Tibetan lama looks and others might have come sincerely wanting peace. When Lama had finished, they would all go home with a happy mind, with some solution to their problems.”

To put this in a way that relates directly to the subject matter of this present work, Lama Yeshe had the marvelous ability to touch in the people he contacted a center of peace, wisdom, and joy that they may have only dimly been aware of previously. Perhaps his most profound teaching was just this: that we each possess within ourselves not only the answer to our own problems but the potential to live our lives on a much higher level than we currently imagine possible. It was not just that Lama Yeshe gave every appearance of having fulfilled that potential within himself, although his example of continuous selfless giving, in spite of a defective heart that should have killed him many years ago, was surely a profound inspiration to all who knew him. Even more strikingly, he was able to inspire in his listeners a confidence that they, too, possessed similar unlimited potential waiting to be tapped.

Throughout this presentation of Lama Yeshe’s introduction to the vast and profound subject of tantra, efforts have been made to keep technical terminology and historical references to a minimum. This has been done in accordance with Lama Yeshe’s wishes in an attempt to convey the flavor of these teachings in as straightforward a manner as possible. However, when technical terms have been used—whether English, Sanskrit, or Tibetan—they have been noted in the glossary.

The completion of this work would have been impossible without the contribution of a great many people, only a few of whom can be acknowledged here. My deepest thanks go first to the other members of the editing retreat at which the material for this book was first selected: Hermes Brandt, Lee Bray, Robyn Brentano, Stephen

Carlier, Sharon Gross, and Nick Ribush. During later stages of editing this material, the Aryatara family at Jaegerndorf and Munich gave unreservedly of their time and hospitality, as did the Philipsen family of Dronten, the Netherlands, and Geoff Jukes of London; the gratitude I feel for this kind and loving support cannot be easily expressed. Special thanks are also due to Yeshe Khadro whose encouragement and assistance proved invaluable. And finally to all those associated with Wisdom Publications—especially Robina Courtin, whose contributions benefited this work at every stage of its development—I would like to convey my deep appreciation for their patience during the many months it took for the manuscript of this book to be completed, as well as for their expert presentation of the final work.

Jonathan Landaw

INTRODUCTION TO TANTRA



Shakyamuni, the Founder of Buddhism

THE TEACHINGS AND PRACTICES known as Buddhist tantra can be traced back 2,500 years to the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. The historical Buddha—to differentiate Shakyamuni from the many other awakened beings who have come before and after him—was born the Indian prince Siddhartha in the sixth century B.C. According to traditional sources, he spent the first twenty-nine years of his life virtually imprisoned in the pleasure palaces built for him by his overprotective father, King Shuddhodana. Eventually, after becoming aware for the first time of sickness, old age, and death, he escaped from his father's realm and began his search for the way to end all suffering and dissatisfaction.

For six years he engaged in strict asceticism and self-denial in an attempt to win control over his body and mind, only to discover that this extreme approach was as misguided as his previous life of sensual indulgence. Eventually, by following the middle path between indulgence and denial and avoiding all other extremes as well, he was able to uproot even the subtlest causes of suffering and ignorance from his mind and thereby become a fully enlightened awakened one: a buddha. For the remaining forty-five years of his life he taught this middle way approach to life and spiritual development in many different forms, each designed to suit the temperament and aptitude of a particular type of person.

Buddha's teachings—known in Sanskrit as Dharma: that which holds us back from suffering and its causes—contain thousands of different methods for overcoming the mental and physical obstacles

to our happiness and well-being, and all fit within the two categories of sutra and tantra. There are differences between these two so-called vehicles (*yana*), but the foundation common to both sutrayana and tantrayana is the fundamentally pure nature of the mind.

Fundamental Purity of the Mind

According to the Buddhist teachings, no matter how confused or deluded we may be at the moment, the underlying and essential nature of our being is clear and pure. In the same way that clouds can temporarily obscure but cannot damage the light-giving power of the sun, so too the temporary afflictions of body and mind—our confusion, anxiety, and the suffering they cause—can temporarily obscure but cannot destroy or even touch the fundamentally clear nature of our consciousness. Dwelling deep within our heart, and within the hearts of all beings without exception, is an inexhaustible source of love and wisdom. And the ultimate purpose of all spiritual practices, whether they are called Buddhist or not, is to uncover and make contact with this essentially pure nature.

When we have developed our own inner purity, inner compassion, and inner love, we can then see the reflection of this purity and loving-kindness in others. But if we have not contacted these qualities within ourselves, we will see everyone as ugly and limited. For whatever we see every day in outer reality is actually nothing more than a projection of our own inner reality.

The existence of this deep, essentially pure nature of mind is not a matter of belief or of blind acceptance of dogma. It is a matter of experience. Countless people throughout history have discovered this great treasure of peace, love, and wisdom within themselves. And countless great teachers and guides have skillfully shown others how they too can discover their own deepest nature, and experience the unsurpassed happiness this discovery automatically brings. Among

these exceptionally kind spiritual guides is Shakyamuni Buddha, and the aim of all his many teachings and methods is the fulfillment of our highest human potential.

According to Buddhist terminology, the ultimate goal of our individual human evolution is enlightenment or buddhahood. This state, which can be achieved by everyone, is attained when all the delusions—greed, hatred, ignorance, and the like—presently obscuring our mind have been completely removed and when all our positive qualities have been fully developed. This state of complete fulfillment, of full awakening, is characterized by unlimited wisdom, unlimited compassion, and unlimited skill, or power.

The Tantric Approach

According to sutrayana, the path to fulfillment is a gradual process of cleansing our mind of all its faults and limitations and developing in their place such beneficial qualities as love and wisdom. This path consists of creating specific causes—behaving ethically, developing our powers of concentration, training in meditative insight, and so forth—for the future attainment of full awakening. Because of this emphasis on creating causes for a future result, the gradual approach of sutra is sometimes known as the causal vehicle to enlightenment.

Compared to this gradual sutra approach, tantrayana is a far speedier path to enlightenment. Although tantric practitioners do not neglect creating the same causes as the followers of sutra, they take the future result of full spiritual evolution as the very starting point in their path. To put this in other words, the tantric yogi or yogini—as these supremely skillful practitioners are called in Sanskrit—learns to think, speak, and act now as if he or she were already a fully enlightened buddha. Because this powerful approach brings the future result of full awakening into the present moment

of spiritual practice, tantra is sometimes called the resultant vehicle to enlightenment.

According to tantra, perfection is not something that is waiting for us somewhere in the future: “If I practice hard now maybe I will become a perfect buddha” or “If I behave well in this life and act like a religious person, maybe some day I will go to heaven.” According to tantra, heaven is now! We should be gods and goddesses right now. But at present we are burdened with limiting concepts: “Men are like this; women are like this; I am a certain way and there is nothing I can do about it;” and so forth. This is why we have conflict within ourselves and with one another. All this conflict will dissolve as we train in the tantric point of view and recognize that each man is a complete man and each woman a complete woman. Furthermore, every man and woman contains both male and female energy. In fact, each one of us is a union of all universal energy. Everything that we need in order to be complete is within us right at this very moment. It is simply a matter of being able to recognize it. This is the tantric approach.

The Principle of Transformation

Speaking generally we can say that all the many practices of tantra involve the principle of transformation. As modern science has demonstrated, the physical universe with its infinite variety of phenomena—from the smallest subatomic particle to the largest galaxy—is in an unceasing state of transformation and evolution from one form of energy to another. Our own body and mind are also energy, and whether we are healthy or ill, mentally balanced or berserk, depends on whether our mental and physical energies are harmonious or not. Through the proper practice of tantra all of our energies, including the subtle yet very powerful energies we are not ordinarily aware of, are harnessed to accomplish the greatest of all

transformations. This is our evolution from an ordinary, limited, and deluded person trapped within the shell of a petty ego into a fully evolved, totally conscious being of unlimited compassion and insight.

How can we achieve such an extraordinary transformation? Where will we find the necessary resources to bring about such a profound change? We do not have far to look. We do not have to extract this force from the nucleus of an atom nor do we have to take a rocket ship into outer space and find it in some distant star. Instead, the basic energy involved in this profound process of tantric transformation is the energy of our own desires.



Shakyamuni Buddha

PLEASURE, DISAPPOINTMENT, AND FULFILLMENT, 3

Tantra and Enjoyment

THE FUNCTION OF TANTRA is to transform all pleasures into the transcendental experience of deep penetrative awareness. Instead of advocating separation from worldly pleasures the way many other traditions do, tantra emphasizes that it is much more effective for human beings to enjoy themselves and channel the energy of their enjoyments into a quick and powerful path to fulfillment and enlightenment. This is the most skillful way of using our precious human potential.

Through its methods of profound transformation, tantra demonstrates that as human beings we have the capacity to enjoy limitless, blissful happiness while at the same time remaining free of the delusions that normally contaminate our pursuit of pleasure. Contrary to what some people might believe, there is nothing wrong with having pleasures and enjoyments. What is wrong is the confused way we grasp on to these pleasures, turning them from a source of happiness into a source of pain and dissatisfaction. It is such grasping and attachment that is the problem, not the pleasures themselves. Therefore, if we could free ourselves from this habitual grasping, we could enjoy ourselves as much as we want without any of the difficulties that usually accompany our ordinary compulsive search for pleasure.

With the proper understanding of transformation, whatever we do, twenty-four hours a day, can bring us closer to our goal of totality and self-fulfillment. All our actions—walking, eating, and even urinating!—can be brought into our spiritual path. Even our sleep, which is usually spent in the darkness of unconsciousness or in the

chaos of dreams, can be turned into the clear-light experience of subtle, penetrating wisdom.

Perhaps all this sounds impossible. Certainly other more gradual spiritual approaches, including those of the sutra path of Buddhism itself, stress that desire, jealousy, and the other delusions of our daily life are always impure and should be treated as poisons. We are constantly reminded of their dangerous effects and are instructed to avoid their influence as much as possible. But, as has been pointed out already, tantra takes a different approach. Although it also insists that delusions such as desirous attachment are the source of our dissatisfaction and suffering and therefore must be overcome, it teaches skillful ways of using the energy of these delusions to deepen our awareness and speed our spiritual progress. Just as those with skill can take poisonous plants and turn them into powerful medicine, so too can the skillful and well-trained tantric practitioner manipulate the energy of desire and even anger to advantage. This is definitely possible.

Images of Wholeness

Tantra not only teaches us how to take advantage of our ordinary pleasurable experiences, it also shows us how to activate a deeper, more intense, and ultimately more satisfying experience of bliss than is ordinarily available through our physical senses.

At present our search for pleasure is habitually directed outward toward external objects of our desire. When we cannot find, or hold on to, these desired objects, we become frustrated and unhappy. For example, many of us are looking for the man or the woman of our dreams, someone who will be the source of limitless happiness for us, yet no matter how many boyfriends or girlfriends we might collect, these dreams remain unfulfilled.

What we do not realize is that within each one of us is an unlimited source of both male and female energy. So many of our problems

arise because we are either ignorant of, or we suppress, what we have within us. Men try to hide their female side and women are afraid of expressing their male energy. As a result we always feel cut off from something we need. We do not feel whole and therefore turn expectantly toward other people for the qualities missing in ourselves in the hope of gaining some sense of completeness. As a result, much of our behavior becomes contaminated by insecurity and possessiveness. In fact, all the problems in the world, from one person's anxiety to warfare between nations, can be traced to this feeling of not being whole.

If necessary, great yogis and yoginis can spend years in solitary isolation without feeling lonely. Yet we may feel unbearably lonely if we are separated from our boyfriend or girlfriend for even one day! Why is there such a great difference between ourselves and the yogis? This has to do with our own internal male and female energies. As long as they are fragmented and unbalanced we will remain desperate for the company of others and incapable of being satisfied. If our internal male/female mandala were complete, however, we would never experience the pain of loneliness at all.

Tantra provides powerful methods for getting in touch with our essential wholeness. Tantric art is filled with potent symbols of the unity and completeness characteristic of our fully realized potential. The image of male and female deities in sexual embrace—taken by some early Western interpreters of Tibetan Buddhism as a sign of its degeneration—is a symbolic portrayal of the inner unification of our own male and female energies. On a deeper level, their embrace symbolizes the aim of the very highest tantric practices: generation of a most subtle and blissful state of mind that, by its very nature, is supremely suited to penetrate ultimate reality and free us from all delusion and suffering. On this level, the male figure represents the experience of great bliss while the female is the symbol of nondual wisdom. Thus their union has nothing whatsoever to do with the gratification of the senses but rather indicates a totally integrated state of blissful wisdom that completely transcends ordinary sense desires.

For those who are ripe, merely seeing such an image can help restore the connection between the male and female aspects of their being. For this connection to be reestablished, however, it is necessary to cut through the influence of the overintellectualizing conceptual mind. It is this type of conceptualization that is largely responsible for the feeling of being alienated from our inner reality. That is one reason why symbols and images such as those used in tantric art and visualization can be so much more effective than mere words in introducing us to our essential nature.

Four Classes of Tantra

There are four classes or levels of Buddhist tantra known respectively as action, performance, yoga, and highest yoga tantra. Each class is designed for a particular type of practitioner and what differentiates one class from another is the intensity of desirous energy the practitioner is skillful enough to direct into the spiritual path. Traditionally, these differing levels of blissful energy are illustrated by examples of increasing sexual intimacy. Thus it is said that the practitioner of the lowest level of tantra is one who is able to use and transform the blissful energy that arises merely from looking at an attractive partner. On the second level, it is the energy of exchanging smiles or laughter with this partner that is transformed. On the third level, the energy used is that of holding hands, while the qualified practitioner of highest yoga tantra has the skill to direct into the spiritual path the desirous energy of sexual union itself. This very powerful imagery gives us an idea of the steadily increasing range of energy that can be channeled and transformed through the practice of tantra.

The practical question is how to make the techniques of tantric transformation work for us individually. It is easy to talk in a general way about the theory and practice of tantra, about taking desire as

the path to enlightenment, but such talk is of little value. What is truly important is to determine, from a close examination of our own capabilities and experiences, the way we handle desirous energy at the moment. We have to ask ourselves how much sensory pleasure we can handle without going berserk. While it is true that tantric practice can eventually arouse a subtle, penetrating state of consciousness, which by its own nature is extraordinarily blissful, this does not mean it is a good idea for us to follow our desires indiscriminately now merely because they too lead to some bliss. We have to be honest about our present limitations and realistic about our present abilities if our practice of tantra is ever to amount to anything worthwhile.

One of the biggest obstacles to true spiritual development is arrogance. This danger is particularly great in relation to the practice of tantra. We may feel that since tantra is advertised as a way of utilizing desire, all we have to do is indulge our uncontrolled appetites or increase the number of desires we already have and we will be following the path of a true practitioner. Some people do have this attitude, but it is completely mistaken. We should never forget that if wallowing in desire were the same as practicing tantra, we would all be highly evolved tantric yogis and yoginis by now! Although our life has been filled with unquenchable desires for this and that, the only thing we have gained from these desires so far is more and more dissatisfaction.

Why is this so? What is it about our ordinary desires that leads inevitably to frustration and disappointment? If we don't understand this, all our talk about using desire as the path to enlightenment is nothing but a joke.

Desire and Distortion

It is important to understand that the type of desire we ordinarily have for an attractive object distorts our perception of that object. An

obvious example of this is sexual desire. To take just one instance of such distortion, consider the case of a man who has become infatuated with a particular woman (or, for that matter, one person with any other). Even if this woman is someone who would generally be considered attractive, the man's desire for her exaggerates her beauty to a ridiculous extent. The more obsessive his desire, the more unrealistic his image of her becomes. Eventually, this image comes to bear no relation whatsoever to reality. Then, instead of being attracted to the woman herself, the man has become infatuated by a projection of her that he himself has created.

This tendency to exaggerate and project is not limited to any one culture; it is a universal phenomenon. When two people look at each other through the eyes of excessive desire, each one makes up an incredible story about the other. "Oh, such beauty! There is nothing even slightly wrong here, inside or out." They build up a perfect myth. Because of infatuation and desire, each becomes blind to the imperfections of the other and exaggerates his or her good qualities beyond recognition. This exaggeration is just the superstitious interpretation, the projection, of the mind obsessed with desire.

To a greater or lesser extent, this tendency to exaggerate is characteristic of all our ordinary desires. We overestimate the beauty or worth of whatever it is we are attracted to and lose sight of its actual nature. We forget, for instance, that this object of our desire—whether it is a person or a thing—is changing all the time, just as we ourselves are. We act as if it will exist forever as something beautiful and desirable, something that will give us eternal joy and satisfaction. Such a conception of permanence is, of course, completely out of touch with reality and by holding on to it we are setting ourselves up for nothing but disappointment.

It is important to understand that this habit of projecting a false notion of permanence upon what we find desirable is not something we do consciously. If we are asked, "Do you think your boyfriend—or girlfriend, or new car, or whatever—will last forever and always

be beautiful?” we will immediately say, “Of course not!” We are too familiar with the forces of change, decay, aging, and death to answer otherwise. But for most of us this understanding is merely intellectual. It is an idea that we know with our brain but is not yet a realization we feel from our heart. If we check our deep, heartfelt attitude toward what we desire, we will discover a habitual grasping for permanence that remains basically untouched by whatever intellectual understanding of the process of change we may have. Just look at the way our heart shakes with anticipation when we are caught up in strong desire for someone or something. Would we experience such intense agitation if we did not hold the unrealistic expectations that we do?

Do not misinterpret this point. I am not trying to be excessively critical, saying that all our ideas are superficial or that all our emotional reactions are perverse. I am just trying to explore a situation that people everywhere have experienced for themselves: namely that although our desires are aimed at bringing us happiness, we nevertheless remain unfulfilled and dissatisfied. If we do not understand the reason for this, any hopes we may have of using desire to gain the complete happiness of spiritual fulfillment are doomed.

The Source of Dissatisfaction

So where does the fault lie? Who or what is responsible for our continual failure to experience the happiness and peace we are so desperately searching for? To answer this question, let us look closely once more at the way ordinary desire works. Feeling somehow incomplete, insecure, and unfulfilled, we look outside ourselves for something or someone that will make us feel whole. Either consciously or subconsciously we feel, “If only I had such-and-such, then I would be happy!” With this thought as our impulse we try to possess whatever attractive object seems most likely to fulfill our

desire. In the process we turn the object into an idol, overestimating its attractive qualities until it bears little resemblance to its actual nature.

In our attempt to gain possession of this overestimated object of desire, we may be either successful or unsuccessful. If we are unsuccessful in our striving—if the object remains outside our grasp—then of course we are disappointed; the more we desire the object the more distraught we become when we are unable to possess it.

But what happens when we are successful, when we do get what we want? What we end up with and what we hoped to end up with turn out to be two very different things. For what we find ourselves in possession of is not the longed-for dream image—the permanent, complete, and ever-satisfying solution to our deepest problems—but something that is as imperfect, incomplete, and impermanent as we are ourselves. This person or thing may indeed give us some momentary pleasure, but it can never begin to live up to the expectations we have loaded upon it. And so sooner or later we feel cheated and bitterly disappointed.

Now, to return to the original question, whom or what do we blame for our unhappiness? More often than not, we unreasonably blame the object. “If only she were prettier...” “If only he treated me better...” “If only the car were faster, or newer...” If only this, if only that. These are the dualistic considerations that fill our head when, disappointed with what we have, we wonder what we could replace it with that would guarantee us the happiness we crave. The next thing we know we are searching for a new wife, or a new husband, or a new car, placing expectations on this new object that are just as unrealistic as the expectations we had placed on what we are now discarding. In this way we continue to circle around and around, changing this and that in our life but never really getting any closer to our desired happiness and peace of mind.

The Tantric Solution

The tantric solution to this problem is extremely radical; it involves a complete transformation of our ordinary vision. This is the central point of the tantric approach. The same desirous energy that ordinarily propels us from one unsatisfactory situation to another is transmuted, through the alchemy of tantra, into a transcendental experience of bliss and wisdom. The practitioner focuses the penetrating brilliance of this blissful wisdom so that it cuts like a laser beam through all false projections of this and that and pierces the very heart of reality.

The various levels of confusion and conflict that now obscure our mind and prevent us from experiencing the totality of our human potential are systematically eradicated by the force of this blissful awareness. Thus the energy of desire is harnessed in such a way that, instead of increasing our dissatisfaction as it ordinarily does, it destroys the very cause of our dissatisfaction: our fundamental ignorance of the nature of reality.

In the Tibetan tantric tradition, this transformation of desirous energy is illustrated by the following analogy. There are certain insects that are said to be born from wood; that is, their life cycle begins with their hatching deep within the body of a tree. Then, as they grow, they feed upon the tree, eating the very wood out of which they were born. Similarly, through the practice of tantric transformation, desire gives birth to insightful wisdom, which in turn consumes all the negativities obscuring our mind, including the desire that gave it birth.

So we can see that the ordinary and the enlightened functions of desire are directly opposed to one another. In tantra, the experience of the bliss that arises from desire expands the mind so that we overcome all our limitations, whereas ordinarily the pleasure that comes from contact with desirable objects narrows our attention and leads to a restrictive obsession for more and better pleasure. Intoxicated

by pleasurable sensations, we lose our awareness of totality and sink into a state of dull stupidity. Our mind contracts around its object and, as we grasp at it for more and more satisfaction, we become further and further removed from reality. We can almost say that under the spell of strong desire we sink into a type of unconsciousness. When we eventually wake up from this dull, dreamlike state, we find that any pleasure we might have experienced has disappeared and all that is left is the dissatisfaction we started with.

To put it another way, we can say that normally our experience of pleasure is dark, clouded by ignorance. Although there may be some momentary excitement, there is no clear mindfulness, no light. In tantric practice the idea is to unify our experience of pleasure with light. This unification is represented visually, as I mentioned, by the image of a male and a female deity embracing. This signifies the unification of the male energy of bliss and the female energy of penetrative, nondual wisdom. Ultimately, these two have to come together for us to experience the true fulfillment of our deepest nature. Because such unity of bliss and wisdom is not our present habit we have to make a great effort to cultivate this experience of totality.

A Note of Caution

Because the habit of falling into a state of dullness and confusion as we grasp on to pleasure is so deeply ingrained in us, it is unreasonable to imagine that we can immediately transform intensely desirous energy into pure and expansive mental clarity. Even though tantra is the quickest path to the completeness of the enlightened experience, we still must progress in stages according to our capacity, otherwise we will be taking on a burden we are not yet strong enough to carry. We then risk ending up like those poor countries who, in their efforts to modernize themselves, have taken on too much too quickly. So often the unfortunate result is that their simple and relatively balanced lives

are thrown into confusion. Thus, although the intended purpose of their rapid industrialization was to bring benefit, the actual result is even greater restlessness and dissatisfaction than before. Similarly, if our practice of tantric transformation is not appropriate to our emotional level and mental capacity—if we think to take on and transform more desirous energy than we can handle—this will only lead us to a more confused state than we are in at the moment.



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