



Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche

The Union of Sutra and Tantra in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition

This article is dedicated
in memory of our precious Root Guru, His Eminence the Third Jamgon Kongtrul,
Karma Lodrö Chökyi Senge (1954-1992) and
to the long life of His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje,
His Eminence the Fourth Jamgon Kongtrul, Lodrö Chökyi Nyima,
Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, and
all wonderful Lamas and Khenpos of the Karma Kagyü Lineage.
May their enlightened activities flourish and benefit countless sentient beings.

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I will be speaking about the three vehicles of Buddhism, about the difference between sutra and tantra, the spoken words of the Buddha and also the words he spoke in other forms. I will also discuss the difference between the Foundation Vehicle, the Great Vehicle, and the Mantra Vehicle. When looking at the different vehicles – whether at the sutras or tantras, whether at the Foundation Vehicle (*Hinayana*) or the Listeners (*Shravakas*), at the Great Vehicle (*Mahayana*), or at the Secret Mantra Vehicle (*Vajrayana*) – all are teachings that the Buddhas and the Buddha himself gave and spoke with his very own words. Therefore, there is no distinction between good and bad, better and worse, greater or lesser. We need to understand that all of these are the teachings of the Buddha. In that regard, the vehicles are all the same – that is true. However, each vehicle addresses a specific need and therefore each has its own particular characteristics.

When Lord Buddha was teaching, to those who could best be tamed or more easily be led to results by the teachings of the Listeners, he taught them the teachings that were appropriate for

them, the teachings of the Listeners. When Lord Buddha was teaching to those who were more suited to receive the teachings of the Great Vehicle, he taught them the teachings of the Great Vehicle. And when he was teaching to those whom it was most appropriate to teach the teachings of the Secret Mantra Vajrayana vehicle, he taught the Secret Mantra Vajrayana. And so in that way, each of the different turnings of the Wheel of Dharma has its own particular characteristics and its own particular set of teachings.

I want to first talk about how the genuine Dharma was brought to Tibet. It was brought to Tibet from India. When Lord Buddha turned the Wheel of Dharma, he first did so in India. He first turned the Wheel of Dharma for the Listeners, and these teachings have become known as the Foundation Vehicle, the Hinayana. Then he turned the Wheel of Dharma of the Great Vehicle. At the same time, he turned the Wheel of Dharma of the Secret Mantra Vajrayana. When he turned the Wheel of Dharma for the Tantrayana, he taught the four different types of tantra: activity tantra, yoga tantra, and unexcelled yoga tantra (*kriyatantra*, *charyatantra*, *yogatantra*, and *anuttarayogatantra* in Sanskrit). He taught these four tantras as well as the teachings for the Listeners and those for Mahayana practitioners. When the Dharma was brought to Tibet, it was translated by the Indian scholars in collaboration with Tibetan translators – they translated all the words of the Buddha into the Tibetan language and compiled them into the *Kangyur*, ‘The Translated Words.’ There are all the sutras and all the teachings on the Vinaya or monastic discipline in the *Kangyur*. The four classes of tantra are also included in the *Kangyur*. And so, the Buddha spoke these words and they were passed down and taught by the Indian scholars. Tibetan translators then translated them all into Tibetan in these different aspects: the Foundation Vehicle, the Great Vehicle, and the four different classes of tantra.

Furthermore, some of the Buddha’s teachings and spoken words are extremely extensive and very complex; others are very vast and quite deep. Since they are so vast and deep, they are often extremely difficult to understand. This is the reason why many scholars wrote commentaries on the words of the Buddha and these have been translated and compiled in the *Tengyur*, ‘The Translations of the Commentaries.’ The commentaries mainly come from the Indian scholars who taught at the great universities in India, such as Nalanda University. These scholars were such great teachers as Noble Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, Asanga, Vasubhandu, and many others. The most renowned are referred to as “the six ornaments that beautify the world,” because they helped make the Buddha’s words understandable. So, the *Tengyur* consists of commentaries on the many sutras and teachings of the Buddha. Some commentaries condense the vast and profound teachings Lord Buddha, presented into short and accessible works. All these commentaries which were written by the noble scholars are included in the *Tengyur*.

In this way, the genuine Dharma first appeared in India where the Buddha taught. Then the scholars expounded upon it and clarified its meaning. Finally, starting in the 8th century, it was all translated into Tibetan as the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*. They have been the basis for the Buddhist practice in Tibet from the 8th century until the present day.

Now there are the works of the scholars and the works of the meditators. The works of the scholars primarily form the basis for the Tibetans to practice listening to and contemplating the teachings, while the oral instructions on meditation are the basis for those practicing meditation. In this way, the lineage of all these different teachings has continued until the present.

Although we can talk about the teachings in many different ways, the great teacher Vasubhandu said, “There are two different types of teachings from the Buddha: the teachings of scriptures and those of realization. The first are the teachings that need to be heard and contemplated. These are the instructions the teacher will give to students to hear. After a student has heard, contemplated, and come to an understanding, he or she becomes a teacher too and passes that understanding on to the next generation. In this way, the lineage of the teachings has been passed down from teacher to student, without diminishing through the centuries.” The primary way these teachings are taught is that first you listen to the teachings. Then, in order to come to know what the teachings mean, you reflect upon and contemplate the teachings. These are called “the teachings of scriptures.”

The other type of teachings are those of realization. Is it sufficient to just listen to the teachings? Is it sufficient to just contemplate them? No, it isn't enough. You actually have to put them into practice. And the way you put these teachings into practice (the Tibetan literally means ‘to take them in your hands’) is that you actually do the meditation practices described, i.e., you engage in the meditation by following your Lama's oral instructions. These teachings of realization enable you to actually realize the meaning. In this way, Dharma teachings are classified as two types: the teachings of scriptures that you understand through listening and contemplating and the teachings of realization that you understand and integrate through meditation practice.

These two types of teachings (scripture and realization) and the three vehicles (Foundation, Great, and Vajra) are all practiced simultaneously. How? The teachings of the Foundation Vehicle primarily deal with discipline and monastic rules. There are different types of people: those who have taken monastic vows and those who haven't. Those who have taken monastic vows follow the monastic discipline. There are others who haven't taken those vows but who hold the lay precepts as set forth in the Foundation Vehicle. In this way, the teachings of the Foundation Vehicle are practiced in Tibetan Buddhism.

How are the teachings of the Great Vehicle followed? Through adhering to the teachings on loving kindness, compassion, and *bodhicitta*, ‘the mind of enlightenment.’ Loving kindness is the wish that all sentient beings be happy and not separated from happiness. The second, compassion, is the wish that all sentient beings always be free from suffering. The third, the mind of enlightenment, is the wish to place all sentient beings in a state of Buddhahood. These three points are practiced through mind training, as described in “The Seven Points of Mind Training.”

There are also the teachings on meditating on the equality of oneself and others, meditating on exchanging oneself and others, and the practice of meditating on others as being superior or more important than oneself. Through these three meditations, we generate the wish that all sentient beings never be separated from happiness and that they always have the cause of happiness – this is loving kindness. We meditate that all sentient beings may be free from suffering and its causes – this is compassion. We also meditate that all living beings may attain the omniscient state of Buddhahood – this is ‘the mind of enlightenment,’ *bodhicitta*.

So the first practice is the meditation on oneself and others as being equal. The way to do this meditation is to consider that “Just as I always want to be happy, all other sentient beings always want to be happy too. Whether a hundred, a thousand, a million, or a billion sentient beings, they all want to be happy. We are all the same. Just as I myself want to be free from suffering, a hundred, a thousand, a million, and a billion sentient beings also want to be free of suffering.” That is how we develop love and compassion. Then wishing to place all living beings in the state of Buddhahood is the mind of enlightenment. This is the meditation on the equality of self and others.

Second is the meditation of exchanging oneself for others. This practice is meditating that anything bad that happens to other sentient beings is just as bad as if it had happened to oneself – it is putting oneself in another person’s shoes, so to speak. This practice also enables us to understand that only by acting to benefit other sentient beings can we actually bring any benefit to ourselves and anyone else. Since beginningless time in samsara and until now, we have been acting only for our own benefit throughout an inconceivable number of births and this has brought us tremendous suffering. But it brings great happiness if we act for the benefit of others. This is the meditation of exchanging self with others.

The third practice is meditating on others as being superior. The motive that we can consider while meditating on others as being superior to us is thinking, “There’s only one me. But how many sentient beings are there? An infinite number and they are much more important. The happiness and freedom from suffering of all sentient beings is much more important than the happiness of just one, than myself alone.” This is the meditation on others as being superior.

Through these three meditations – meditating on others as being equal to oneself, exchanging self with others, and meditating on others as being superior to oneself – we develop the wish that all sentient beings may be happy and may have the causes of happiness, which is loving kindness; and we develop the wish that all sentient beings may be free from suffering and its causes, which is compassion. Furthermore, we develop the wish that all may be placed in the unexcelled state of Buddhahood, which is the mind of enlightenment.



The practices in the Secret Mantra Vajrayana require first the empowerment, then the instructions, and finally the reading transmission. Once you have these three factors, then you can engage in the meditation practices of the Secret Mantra Vajrayana.

The first factor to practice Vajrayana is the empowerment. What is an empowerment? It is what ripens your mind. How? If you don't have any faith, then the empowerment can help you generate faith. If you lack diligence, then the empowerment helps you generate diligence. And so, in that way, the empowerment ripens you. Now, the empowerment consists of several aspects, which were described by the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa. The first is the external empowerment with the vase and other implements. During the course of the actual empowerment, the vase and other implements are placed on the crown of your head. When this occurs or when you sip the water from the vase, then you generate the conviction, "I have received this empowerment" – that is the external empowerment accomplished with the implements of the specific ceremony.

The second aspect of an empowerment is the transformation of one's body into the mandala of the deity – the inner empowerment. During the initiation, the teacher instructs you on the visualization and the student sees his or her body as that of the deity, as having the color of the deity's body, the same number of hands, wearing all the ornaments, and possessing the features of the deity – you see yourself as being the deity with all the attributes. This is the aspect of accomplishing the deity's body during the inner empowerment.

Usually we see ourselves in an impure form; we see our body made of flesh, blood, bones, and other impurities – these aspects do appear to us. However, if we change these perceptions just a little bit, then we can actually see ourselves in the pure form, as the deity. And so, this is accomplishing yourself as the deity's mandala through the inner empowerment.

The third aspect is the secret empowerment, which accomplishes the wisdom of bliss and emptiness. Usually, you think that your mind is filled with negative emotions and thoughts. On the relative level, this does seem to be the nature of the mind. However, through the secret aspects of the empowerment you can be shown to see that the actual nature of the mind is emptiness and bliss. The Lama gives you the instructions on how to look at your mind and to see that its true nature is the union of bliss and emptiness. This is the third aspect of an empowerment, which shows you that your mind is the union of bliss and emptiness.

After receiving an empowerment, a student receives vajra instructions, the second factor for practicing the secret Mantrayana. The first factor (the empowerment) and the second (the vajra instructions) depend on the Lama; they depend upon the instructions the Lama gives. Without instructions from the Lama, they would be missing and could not be given. Usually, when we talk about Buddhism, we see the main teacher as Lord Buddha himself. However, in Tibetan Buddhism, often the main teacher is referred to as the Lama. You might wonder and ask, "Isn't it a bit strange that the Lama is considered more important than the Buddha himself?" You might think that this is inappropriate. But actually, it isn't because the Buddha lived and passed beyond misery over 2,500 years ago, so there is no way that we can actually meet him personally – there is no way that we can receive instructions from him. But that does not mean that we cannot practice Buddhism, that we cannot attain the final result. If you are intelligent and diligent enough, then you can, in this very lifetime, actually attain the omniscient state of Buddhahood,

but it does depend upon your intelligence and diligence more than anything else. But that is not enough – you also need to have a teacher who can actually give you the instructions and tell you how to meditate. Your teacher has to give you the instructions that have been passed down from the Buddha himself. And so, your root Lama is your primary Lama who gives you the main instructions. The lineage Lamas are all the Lamas who have passed on the instructions, from master to disciple, for many generations. Therefore, the root and lineage Lamas are as important as the Buddha himself, because without them it would be impossible for you to receive the vajra empowerments and instructions.

The vajra instructions are the teachings passed down from the root and lineage Lamas to you, the instructions on how to meditate. How do you sit when you meditate? What do you do with your mind then? When engaged in sitting meditation in Secret Mantra Vajrayana, there are particular instructions on how to sit, called “the seven points of the posture of Vairocana.” Vairocana is a Buddha, whose name denotes ‘clear seeing.’ There are also the five points of meditative concentration. So these are the ways you sit, the way you place your body in the correct posture. In that way, you have the vajra instructions on what to do with your body. There are also the vajra instructions on what to do with your mind. What do you visualize when you are meditating on a *yidam*, ‘meditation deity’? What do you do with your mind when you are doing tranquillity meditation? What do you do with your mind when you are doing insight meditation? All of these instructions belong to the vajra instructions that are given to you by your Lama. Furthermore, in the Secret Mantra Vajrayana there are instructions on what to do with your speech, which prayers to recite, what rituals to read, how to recite the mantras, and so forth. In this way, there are vajra instructions for what to do with your body, speech, and mind. And all of these vajra instructions are given to you by your root and lineage Lamas.

The third prerequisite to practice Vajrayana is the reading transmission, which is performed in order to receive the blessings of the practice. The Lama reads the practice and the student listens attentively; the instructions and the text are read aloud and the student receives the blessings by listening. The blessings are not weak in any way; they are strong and you receive them by listening. So this is the third aspect, the reading transmission.

How do we put these three factors of empowerment into practice? How do we actually do the meditation? When speaking about meditation in Vajrayana, we usually talk about two aspects: the development stage and the completion stage. The development stage is meditating on oneself as being the yidam. You might meditate on yourself as being Noble Chenrezig, or you might meditate on yourself as being the Medicine Buddha, or you might see yourself as being Buddha Shakyamuni himself. During this meditation, you visualize yourself as being the deity – you visualize your body as being the deity’s body. Normally, we don’t see ourselves that way and you might conclude, “Oh, I’m just an ordinary being. I’m not the deity. What possible use or good can there be in meditating on myself as something I am not? What need is there in doing this? Why?” There is both a reason and a need to do this practice. Normally we see ourselves in an impure form. We see that our body is made of blood, bones, flesh, and so forth. But actually, even though we have this impure perception of ourselves, we have the capability within to practice and attain Buddhahood. We all have the capability to generate love and compassion; we all have the ability to generate the mind of enlightenment and to attain the ultimate state of Buddhahood. This ability is called “Buddha nature.” The Buddha himself said, “Buddha nature

resides in every sentient being.” We know that the Buddha nature actually exists and when practicing the development stage, we are meditating on something that exists as it exists. It is not the case that we are meditating on something that appears one way yet is different. This is actually a case of meditating on your own nature as it actually is. This is the reason for doing the meditation.

You might wonder, “Why meditate?” Since beginningless time in samsara, we have been accumulating negative habits of thought, which cause us to see things in an impure way. Based upon these impure perceptions, we experience immense suffering. Through correct meditation we can see that our impure perceptions are actually empty, that they have no true nature of their own. If we meditate upon the impure, which has no true nature, as having a nature of its own, as something that actually exists, then we would just continue to reinforce our habitual patterns and would not be able to purify ourselves. But by meditating on ourselves as being the yidam, we gradually remove impurities; we remove the habitual tendencies and gradually see ourselves as being purer and purer. This is both the reason and the necessity for doing this meditation. That was the description of the development stage.

After the development stage, the instructions on the completion stage follow. When discussing the completion stage, we usually speak about meditating on the mind’s nature. But often beginners encounter great difficulties, therefore we need to practice tranquillity meditation. For beginners, usually the completion stage instructions present the description of tranquillity meditation first. There are many different types of tranquillity meditations, but in general we can summarize them into two: tranquillity meditation and without a support. Tranquillity meditation with a support means that you have an object upon which you rest your mind. Tranquillity meditation without a support means that you don’t have an object upon which you focus your attention and just let your mind rest as it is.

There are several types of tranquillity meditation with a support. One is an impure support, the other is a pure support. An impure support is simply taking a pebble, a stick, or some ordinary object, placing it on the ground, and using that as the support, resting your mind on that object. If you want to have a pure support, then you take a small statue of the Buddha and you rest your mind or focus your mind on that. You can also meditate by counting your breath, by looking at the nature of your breath, and so forth. These are methods for practicing tranquillity meditation.

When we begin doing tranquillity meditation, we find that we have a lot of thoughts and that our mind does not really rest – our mind is bursting with thoughts. But if we continue with the technique, then gradually, little by little, our mind becomes clearer and clearer and our thoughts diminish more and more. This is the method that enables us to reach a point at which we can easily rest in tranquillity. This is the first aspect, meditation on tranquillity. Now we will look at insight meditation.

When we talk about insight meditation, what we normally mean is meditating on the empty nature of all things. This is something that was taught by Lord Buddha in such texts as “The Heart Sutra,” where he taught that there is no form, no feeling, no conception, no formation, no consciousness, and so forth. Through teachings such as these, great practitioners have realized the empty nature of all phenomena; they practiced on that and actually developed some powers based

upon their realization – negative things can actually be transformed into positive things. Such accomplishments arise from looking at the nature of phenomena and seeing that all things are emptiness, that nothing validly exists as “a thing,” and that nothing can be proven to have a nature of its own. Due to this realization, practitioners have developed the capability or power to transform negative into positive. The method we use to meditate upon this is to look at the nature of our own mind and to see if there is anything there that can be substantially proven to exist. This is not an analytical approach but means directly looking at the mind to see what is there. When you look to see what is there, you can’t find any particular thing that can actually be proven or seen to really exist. In this way, you look and see that your mind is emptiness, which is accomplished through meditation of insight. So, that is what I wanted to share with you on meditation. Thank you very much.

Dedication Prayers

Through this goodness may omniscience be attained
And thereby may every enemy (mental defilement) be overcome.
May beings be liberated from the ocean of samsara
That is troubled by waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

By this virtue may I quickly attain the state of Guru Buddha and then
Lead every being without exception to that very state!
May precious and supreme bodhicitta that has not been generated now be so,
And may precious bodhicitta that has already been never decline, but continuously increase!

May the life of the Glorious Lama remain steadfast and firm.
May peace and happiness fully arise for beings as limitless in number as space is vast in its extent.
Having accumulated merit and purified negativities, may I and all living beings without exception
swiftly establish the levels and grounds of Buddhahood.



Photo of His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa with Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche in 2009 courtesy of Kagyü Mönlam Chenmo. One photo offered here shows the view of the newly built Gompa at Thrangu Tashi Chöling in Qinghai (East Tibet) and the other photo shows the inauguration ceremony that was performed by Ven. Lodrö Nyima Rinpoche in July 2004. Special thanks to Lodrö Nyima Rinpoche for having translated the officiating speech by Lena Fong to over 20,000 people. Since the precious Kudung Stupa of the Second Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche is located at Thrangu Tashi Chöling, the new Gompa was sponsored by KYC Jamgon Kongtrul Foundation and is dedicated in memory to the Third Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche. “Thank you,” Lena, for your immense contribution, also for having given these two wonderful photos for this article. Photo of lotus also taken and kindly offered by Lena. The teachings were

translated and the transcript was edited by David Karma Choephel, who we wish to thank very much for his fabulous contribution. It appeared in *“Thar Lam”* (published in New Zealand) in Aug. 2005, and in 2009 was edited again slightly and arranged for the Download Project of Khenpo Karma Namgyal at Karma Lekshey Ling Institute in Kathmandu, Nepal by Gaby Hollmann of Munich (co-editor of *“Thar Lam”*). Copyright Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche and Karma Lekshey Ling Institute, 2009. All rights reserved. Distributed for personal use only.