

# **Making Sense of Tantra**

# Table of Contents

<b><u>Part I: Basic Questions and Doubts about Tantra</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>1 The Meaning of Tantra</u> .....	1
<u>The Definition of the Word Tantra</u> .....	1
<u>Mental Continuums as Tantras</u> .....	1
<u>The Term Tantra in Reference to Buddha-Nature</u> .....	2
<u>Beginningless Successions that Can Have an End</u> .....	3
<u>The Nyingma and Kagyu Explanations of Tantra</u> .....	3
<u>The Role of Buddha-Figures in Tantra</u> .....	4
<u>The Sakya Presentation</u> .....	5
<u>The Gelug Explanation</u> .....	6
<u>Summary</u> .....	7
<u>2 The Authenticity of the Tantras</u> .....	7
<u>The Source of the Tantras</u> .....	7
<u>Different Views of Shakyamuni Buddha as a Teacher</u> .....	9
<u>The Relation between Buddhist and Hindu Tantra</u> .....	10
<u>The Clear Light Continuum as the Deepest Source of the Tantras</u> .....	10
<u>The Criteria for Establishing the Authenticity of the Tantras</u> .....	12
<u>The Four Sealing Points for Labeling an Outlook as Based on Enlightening</u> <u>Words</u> .....	12
<u>Developing Firm Conviction in the Authenticity of the Tantras</u> .....	13
<u>3 The Use of Ritual in Tantra Practice</u> .....	14
<u>Western and Asian Forms of Creativity</u> .....	14
<u>Creativity and Individuality in Tantra Practice</u> .....	15
<u>The Benefits of Tantra Ritual for Busy Westerners</u> .....	16
<u>Tantra Ritual as a Venue for Expressing Emotions</u> .....	16
<u>Concluding Remarks</u> .....	17
<u>4 Buddha-Figures</u> .....	17
<u>The Use of Buddha-Figures in Practices Shared by Mahayana Sutra and Tantra</u> .....	17
<u>Buddha-Figures and Self-Images</u> .....	18
<u>Buddha-Figures and Archetypes</u> .....	18
<u>Buddha-Figures as Emanations of Buddhas</u> .....	20
<u>Buddha-Figures as Objects for Prayers</u> .....	20
<u>Coarse and Subtle Emanations of Buddha-Figures</u> .....	21
<u>Buddha-Figures as Containers for Practice</u> .....	22
<u>Cultural Diversity in Buddha-Figures</u> .....	23
<u>The Possible Use of Western Religious Icons as Buddha-Figures</u> .....	23
<u>5 Tantric Imagery</u> .....	25
<u>Survey of the Misunderstanding</u> .....	25
<u>Couples in Union</u> .....	25
<u>Nonduality</u> .....	26
<u>Peaceful and Forceful Figures</u> .....	27
<u>Concluding Remarks</u> .....	27
<b><u>Part II: Why Tantra Is More Efficient Than Sutra</u></b> .....	<b>29</b>
<u>6 Gelug Presentation of Tantra in General</u> .....	29
<u>Methodology</u> .....	29
<u>(1) Closer Analogies</u> .....	29
<u>In Sutra</u> .....	29
<u>General Tantra as the Resultant Vehicle</u> .....	30

# Table of Contents

## Part II: Why Tantra Is More Efficient Than Sutra

<u>Purified Bodies</u> .....	31
<u>Tantric Transformation of Self-Image</u> .....	31
<u>The Voidness of Self-Images</u> .....	32
<u>Mantras</u> .....	33
<u>Purified Environments - Mandalas</u> .....	34
<u>Purified Manner of Enjoyment</u> .....	34
<u>Purified Actions</u> .....	35
<u>Mudras, Mantras, and Samadhis</u> .....	35
<u>Validity of the Method</u> .....	36
<u>Multiple Limbs and Faces</u> .....	36
<u>(2) Closer Union of Method and Wisdom</u> .....	37
<u>In Sutra</u> .....	37
<u>Buddha-Figures as Method in General Tantra</u> .....	37
<u>Voidness and the Basis for a Voidness</u> .....	38
<u>Two Truths</u> .....	38
<u>Method and Wisdom in General Tantra Having One Manner of</u> <u>Cognitively Taking an Object</u> .....	39
<u>Summary</u> .....	40
<u>(3) Special Basis for Voidness</u> .....	40
<u>Buddha-Figures as Less Deceptive</u> .....	40
<u>Buddha-Figures as More Stable</u> .....	41
<u>Buddha-Figures as More Subtle</u> .....	42
<u>(4) Special Level of Mental Activity</u> .....	42
<u>Concluding Points Concerning Voidness in Sutra and Tantra</u> .....	43
<u>7 Non-Gelug Variations Concerning General Tantra</u> .....	43
<u>(1) Closer Analogies</u> .....	43
<u>Buddha-Nature and Positive Self-Images</u> .....	43
<u>Sakya View of Inseparable Samsara and Nirvana</u> .....	44
<u>(2) Closer Union of Method and Wisdom</u> .....	44
<u>In Terms of Self-Voidness</u> .....	44
<u>Two Non-Gelug Usages of the Term "Self-Voidness"</u> .....	45
<u>Relevant Assertions Unique to Non-Gelug</u> .....	46
<u>Conceptual and Nonconceptual Unions of Method and Wisdom in Terms</u> <u>of Self-Voidness</u> .....	46
<u>In Terms of Other-Voidness</u> .....	47
<u>(3) Special Basis for Voidness</u> .....	48
<u>Buddha-Figures as Less Deceptive</u> .....	48
<u>Buddha-Figures as More Stable</u> .....	49
<u>Buddha-Figures as More Subtle</u> .....	49
<u>(4) Special Level of Mental Activity</u> .....	50
<u>Concluding Points Concerning Voidness in Sutra and Tantra</u> .....	50
<u>8 Gelug Presentation of Anuttarayoga in General</u> .....	50
<u>(1) Closer Analogies</u> .....	51
<u>Downward Analogies</u> .....	51
<u>Upward Analogies</u> .....	51
<u>The Analogous Practices</u> .....	52
<u>(2) Closer Union of Method and Wisdom</u> .....	53
<u>Method in Terms of the Appearance of a Body</u> .....	53

# Table of Contents

## **Part II: Why Tantra Is More Efficient Than Sutra**

<u>Method in Terms of a Blissful Awareness</u> .....	54
<u>The Two Sets of Obscuration</u> .....	55
<u>The Necessity for a Blissful Awareness of Voidness</u> .....	56
<u>Yab-Yum</u> .....	57
(3) <u>Special Basis for Voidness</u> .....	57
(4) <u>Special Level of Mental Activity</u> .....	57
<u>Introductory Remarks</u> .....	57
<u>Clear-Light Mental Activity Is Naturally Nonconceptual</u> .....	58
<u>Clear-Light Mental Activity Is Naturally Free of All Disturbing Emotions</u> <u>and Attitudes</u> .....	58
<u>Clear-Light Mental Activity Does Not Produce Appearances of True</u> <u>Existence</u> .....	58
<u>Clear-Light Mental Activity Can Have Omniscient Awareness</u> .....	59
9 <u>Non-Gelug Variations Concerning General Anuttarayoga</u> .....	60
(1) <u>Closer Analogies</u> .....	60
<u>General Sakya Anuttarayoga</u> .....	60
<u>Nyingma and Kagyu Practices Influenced by Nyingma</u> .....	60
<u>Sakya Tradition of Lamdray</u> .....	61
(2) <u>Closer Union of Method and Wisdom</u> .....	61
(3) <u>Special Basis for Voidness</u> .....	62
<u>Sakya and Kagyu Explanation</u> .....	62
<u>Nyingma Explanation</u> .....	62
(4) <u>Special Level of Mental Activity</u> .....	63
<u>Introductory Remarks Concerning the Two Sets of Obscurations</u> .....	63
<u>Clear-Light Mental Activity Is Naturally Nonconceptual</u> .....	64
<u>Clear-Light Mental Activity is Naturally Free of All Disturbing Emotions</u> <u>and Attitudes</u> .....	64
<u>Assertions Common to All Non-Gelug Traditions</u> .....	64
<u>Assertions Specific to Nyingma</u> .....	64
<u>Assertions Unique to Sakya</u> .....	65
<u>Clear-Light Mental Activity Does Not Produce Appearances of Any of the</u> <u>Four Extreme Modes of Impossible Existence</u> .....	66
<u>Clear-Light Mental Activity Has More Stable Reflexive Deep Awareness</u> <u>of Its Own Nature</u> .....	67
<u>Clear-Light Mental Activity Can Have Omniscient Awareness</u> .....	67
10 <u>Kalachakra</u> .....	68
(1) <u>Closer Analogies</u> .....	68
(2) <u>Closer Union of Method and Wisdom</u> .....	70
(3) <u>Special Basis for Voidness</u> .....	71
(4) <u>Special Level of Mental Activity</u> .....	72
<u>Non-Gelug Variations Concerning Kalachakra</u> .....	72
<u>Conclusion</u> .....	73
<b><u>Links</u></b> .....	<b>74</b>

# Part I: Basic Questions and Doubts about Tantra

## 1 The Meaning of Tantra

### The Definition of the Word *Tantra*

Buddha's teachings include both *sutras* and *tantras*. The sutras present the basic themes of practice for gaining liberation from uncontrollably recurring problems (Skt. *samsara*) and, beyond that, to reach the enlightened state of a Buddha, with the ability to help others as much as is possible. The themes include methods for developing ethical self-discipline, concentration, love, compassion, and a correct understanding of how things actually exist. The tantras present advanced practices based on the sutras.

The Sanskrit word *tantra* means the warp of a loom or the strands of a braid. Like the strings of a warp, the tantra practices serve as a structure for intertwining the sutra themes to weave a tapestry of enlightenment. Moreover, tantra combines physical, verbal, and mental expressions of each practice, which braid together creating a holistic path of development. Because one cannot integrate and practice simultaneously all the sutra themes without previously training in each individually, tantra practice is extremely advanced.

The root of the word *tantra* means to stretch or to continue without a break. Emphasizing this connotation, the Tibetan scholars translated the term as *gyu* (*rgyud*), which means an unbroken continuity. Here, the reference is to continuity over time, as in a succession of moments of a movie, rather than to continuity through space, as in a succession of segments of pavement. Moreover, the successions discussed in tantra resemble eternal movies: they have neither beginnings nor ends.

Two movies are never the same, and even two copies of the identical movie can never be the same roll of film. Similarly, everlasting successions always maintain their individualities. Furthermore, the frames of movies play one at a time, with everything changing from frame to frame. In the same manner, moments in everlasting successions are ephemeral, with only one moment occurring at a time and without anything solid enduring throughout the successions.

### Mental Continuums as Tantras

The most outstanding example of an everlasting succession is the *mental continuum* (mind-stream), the everlasting succession of moments of an individual mind. *Mind*, in Buddhism, refers to an individual, subjective, mere experiencing of something and not to a physical or immaterial object that either does the experiencing or is the tool someone uses to experience things. Further, a mental continuum is not a flow of experiences that accumulate such that one person has more experience than does another. A mental continuum comprises simply an unbroken succession of moments of mental functioning - the mere experiencing of things. The things experienced include sights, sounds, feelings, thoughts, sleep, and even death. *Mere* implies that the experiencing of them need not be deliberate, emotionally moving, or even conscious.

Further, the experiencing of something is always individual and subjective. Two people may experience seeing the same movie, but their experiencing of it would not be the same - one

may like it; the other may not. How they experience the movie depends on many interrelated factors, such as their moods, their health, their companions, and even their seats.

*Individual beings* are those with mental continuums. Each moment of their existence, they experience something. They act with intention - even if not conceptually planned - and subjectively experience the immediate and long-term effects of what they do. Thus, the mental continuums of individual beings - their experiencing of things - changes from moment to moment, as do they, and their mental continuums go on from one lifetime to the next, with neither a beginning nor an end. Buddhism accepts as fact not only that mental continuums last eternally, but also that they lack absolute starts, whether from the work of a creator, from matter/energy, or from nothing.

Individual beings, and thus mental continuums, interact with one another, but remain distinct, even in Buddhahood. Although Shakyamuni Buddha and Maitreya Buddha are equivalent in their attainments of enlightenment, they are not the same person. Each has unique connections with different beings, which accounts for the fact that some individuals can meet and benefit from a particular Buddha and not from another.

Movies maintain their individualities without requiring or containing innate fixed markers, such as their titles, ever-present as part of each moment, giving the films individual identities solely by their own powers. Movies sustain individual identities by depending merely on interwoven changing factors, such as a sensible sequencing of frames. Likewise, everlasting mental continuums go on without innate fixed markers, such as souls, selves, or personalities, that remain unaffected and unchanging during one lifetime and from one lifetime to the next and which, by their own powers, give them individual identities. To sustain their individual identities, mental continuums depend merely on interwoven changing factors, such as sensible sequences of experiencing things according to principles of behavioral cause and effect (Skt. *karma*). Even on a more general level, mental continuums lack inherently fixed identities such as human, mosquito, male, or female. Depending on their actions, individual beings appear in different forms in each lifetime - sometimes with more suffering and problems, sometimes with less.

### **The Term *Tantra* in Reference to Buddha-Nature**

Although mental continuums, and thus individual beings, lack innate souls that by their own powers give them their identities, nevertheless they have other features accompanying them as integral facets of their natures. These innate facets also constitute tantras - successions of moments with no beginning or end. The everlasting innate facets that transform into a Buddha's enlightening facets, or which allow each mental continuum to become the continuum of a Buddha, comprise that continuum's *Buddha-nature factors*.

For example, unbroken successions of moments of physical appearance, communication, and mental functioning (body, speech, and mind), the operation of good qualities, and activity forever accompany the succession of moments of each mental continuum, although the particular forms of the five vary each moment. The physical appearance may be invisible to the human eye; the communication may be unintentional and merely through body language; and the mental functioning may be minimal, as with being asleep or unconscious. Good qualities, such as understanding, caring, and capability, may operate at miniscule levels or may only be dormant; and activity may be merely autonomic. Nevertheless, individually and subjectively experiencing something each moment entails continually having some physical appearance, some form of communication of some information, some mental functioning,

some level of operation of good qualities, and some activity.

The fact that unbroken successions of moments of the five innate facets accompany the mental continuum of each being in every rebirth accounts for the fact that successions of the five continue to accompany each being's continuum also as a Buddha. From another point of view, moments of the five continue to occur in unbroken succession even after enlightenment, but now their forms manifest as a Buddha's five enlightening facets. They are *enlightening* in the sense that they are the most effective means for leading others to enlightenment.

## Beginningless Successions that Can Have an End

As tantras, the everlasting continuities of an individual's Buddha-nature factors braid together to form integrated wholes in each moment, functioning together like a network. In another sense, the everlasting continuities constitute the strings of warps upon which successions of moments of further accompanying features of mental continuums interweave. Many intertwining features are also beginningless, but not all of them continue forever. Some can have an end and thus do not constitute integral facets of the continuum's nature. The most significant ones are beginningless continuities of confusion about how things exist, the habits of such confusion, and the uncontrollably recurring problems and limitations that they produce. Here, to simplify the discussion, we are using the term *confusion* in place of unawareness (ignorance), but without any connotation of disorganization, disorientation, or dementia.

Beginningless successions of moments of different levels of confusion and their habits can end, because their exact opposites, succession of moments of understanding and its habits, can replace and remove them forever. While successions of moments of confusion and its habits accompany mental continuums, their Buddha-nature factors cannot function at their full capacities. So long as mental continuums are in that condition, the individuals denoted by them are *limited beings* (sentient beings). The factors function at peak levels only with the total removal of all limiting features or "fleeting stains," namely with the total removal of all levels of confusion and their habits. When the continuities of all limiting features stop forever, the individuals are no longer limited beings. Their unending continuities as individuals go on, but the beings have now transformed into Buddhas.

## The Nyingma and Kagyu Explanations of Tantra

All four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism - Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug - accept as a meaning of tantra the everlasting successions of moments of interwoven Buddha-nature factors. The special explanations of each tradition shed further light on the topic and complement each other. Let us look first at the general presentation common to Nyingma and Kagyu, since it specializes in discussing tantra in terms of Buddha-nature in general. Their presentations derive from Maitreya's *Furthest Everlasting Continuum*.

Maitreya explained that although successions of moments of Buddha-nature factors continue forever, they may be unrefined, partially refined, or totally refined. The distinction derives from whether successions of moments of all levels of confusion and their habits accompany the mental continuum without a break, only some of them do for some of the time, or none of them accompany it ever again. These three conditions of the everlasting continuities of Buddha-nature factors are the *basis*, *pathway*, and *resultant tantras*.

As basis tantras, the always-available continuities of Buddha-nature factors are the working materials for achieving enlightenment. From this perspective, the factors are unrefined or "impure" in the sense that successions of moments of all levels of confusion and their habits interlace with the factors at all times, limiting their functioning to varying extents.

On the path to enlightenment, practitioners work to remove the limitations by stopping, in stages, the continuities of the various levels of confusion and their habits that interweave with their bodies, communication, minds, good qualities, and actions. Consequently, during the purification process, the continuities of Buddha-nature factors, as pathway tantras, are partially refined and partly unrefined. Sometimes, periods of full understanding accompany the factors; at other times, periods with merely the momentum of understanding ensue. Occasionally, successions of moments of confusion temporarily cease. Afterwards, continuities of some levels resume, but gradually none of them ever return. Similarly, the habits of confusion occasionally stop giving rise to moments of confusion; but eventually, the continuities of the habits cease forever.

On the resultant level of Buddhahood, the continuities of Buddha-nature factors, as resultant tantras, are totally refined in the sense that they are completely free, forever, of accompanying periods of any levels of confusion or their habits. Thus, the Buddha-nature factors function everlastingly at their full capacities as the interwoven enlightening facets of a Buddha, for example as a Buddha's enlightening physical, communicative, and mental faculties, good qualities, and activities.

### **The Role of Buddha-Figures in Tantra**

*Buddha-figures* represent the Buddha-nature factors during refined or "pure" phases when successions of moments of full understanding accompany their continuities. Because Buddha-figures have bodies, communication, minds, good qualities, and actions that work together like an integrated network, they are fit to represent these Buddha-nature factors. Moreover, the figures often have multiple faces, arms, and legs. The array of faces and limbs represent themes from sutra, many of which are also among the Buddha-nature factors. Tantra practitioners use the figures in meditation to further the purification process.

The Sanskrit term for Buddha-figures, *ishtadevata*, means chosen deities, namely deities chosen for practice to become a Buddha. They are "deities" in the sense that their abilities transcend those of ordinary beings, yet they neither control people's lives nor require worship. Thus, the Tibetan scholars translated the term as *lhagpay lha* (*lhag-pa'i lha*), special deities, to differentiate them from worldly gods or from God the Creator.

The more common Tibetan equivalent, *yidam* (*yi-dam*), denotes the intended meaning more clearly. *Yi* means mind and *dam* stands for *damtsig* (*dam-tshig*, Skt. *samaya*), a close bond. Tantra practitioners bond with male and female Buddha-figures, such as Avalokiteshvara and Tara, by imagining themselves as having the enlightening facets of physical appearance, communication, mental functioning, good qualities, and activities of these figures. More precisely, while the continuities of their Buddha-nature factors are still partly unrefined as pathway tantras, practitioners bond or mesh them with continuities of the factors imagined as the totally refined facets of Buddha-figures. Even when practitioners have gained only incomplete understandings of how things exist, imagining their partially unrefined Buddha-nature factors functioning as totally refined Buddha-figure facets is the general tantra method for removing the fleeting stains of periods of confusion and its habits from everlasting continuities of Buddha-nature factors.



In short, the Buddha-nature factors remain the same factors whether they function as basis, pathway, or resultant tantras. The mental continuum always manifests some form of physical appearance, communication of something, and mental functioning, as well as some level of operation of good qualities and some activity. The only difference is the extent to which successions of moments of different levels of confusion and their habits accompany the continuities of the factors and limit their functioning.

According to the Nyingma and Kagyu presentations, then, the subject matter of tantra is the intertwining of the basis, pathway, and resultant conditions of everlasting continuities of Buddha-nature factors to weave a method for achieving enlightenment. Specifically, tantra concerns methods for working with periods of the Buddha-nature factors as pathway tantras to purify successions of the factors as basis tantras so that they ultimately function as the everlasting continuities of resultant tantras. Tantra practice effects this transformation by bonding continuities of unrefined Buddha-nature factors with successions of moments of their refined situation as represented by the enlightening facets of Buddha-figures.

### The Sakya Presentation

The Sakya presentation of the meaning of tantra derives from *The Hevajra Tantra*, a text from the highest class of tantra. This presentation elucidates the relation between Buddha-figures and everyday beings that allows for a bonding of corresponding facets of the two in tantra practice.

An exclusive topic of highest tantra is the *clear light continuum* (clear light mind), the subtlest level of everyone's mental continuum. All mental continuums have clear light levels of experiencing things, which, as the ultimate Buddha-nature, provide them with deepest everlasting continuity. Coarser levels of experiencing things, such as those at which sense perception and conceptual thought occur, do not actually continue without a break from one lifetime to the next. Moreover, they stop forever with the attainment of enlightenment. Only successions of clear light levels continue without interruption, even after becoming a Buddha. If individual beings are analogous to radios, then the coarser levels of their mental continuums are similar to the radios' playing on different stations, while their clear light levels resemble the radios' simply being on. The analogy, however, is not exact. Radios can stop playing, whereas mental continuums never cease their flow.

Regardless of the level at which it occurs, the mere, individual, subjective experiencing of things entails giving rise to appearances of things (clarity) and mentally engaging with them (awareness). In other words, one does not directly perceive external objects, but merely appearances or mental representations of them that arise as part of the act of perceiving. Appearances, here, include not only the sights of things, but also their sounds, smells, tastes, and physical sensations, as well as thoughts about them. Western science describes the same point from a physical perspective. In perceiving things, one does not actually cognize external objects, but only complexes of electrochemical impulses that represent the objects in the nervous system and brain. Although all levels of experiencing things entail the arising of appearances of them, the clear light continuum is the actual source that gives rise to all appearances.

Mentally engaging with appearances means to see, hear, smell, taste, physically sense, or think them, or to emotionally feel something about them. The mental engagement may be subliminal or even unconscious. Further, giving rise to appearances of things and mentally engaging with them are two ways of describing the same phenomenon. The arising of a

thought and the thinking of a thought are actually the same mental event. A thought does not arise and then one thinks it: the two mental actions occur simultaneously because they describe the same event.

The Sakya discussion of tantra focuses on a specific Buddha-nature factor, namely the everlasting succession of moments of the clear light continuum's innate activity of giving rise to appearances from itself. The appearance-making is automatic, nondeliberate, and unconscious. One may deliberately look at something; but when one sees it, one's clear light continuum does not deliberately construct an appearance of it. Moreover, the appearances that arise from the clear light continuum may be of the continuum's physical basis - one's body - or of any other objects that it perceives.

Here, the main point is that appearance-making occurs inseparably on two levels: coarse and subtle. *Inseparably* (*yermey, dbyer-med*) means that if one level validly occurs, the other level validly occurs as well. In this context, coarse appearances are of everyday beings and their environments; subtle appearances are of Buddha-figures and their surroundings.

Everyday beings and Buddha-figures are like quantum levels of clear light continuums. Subatomic particles have several quantum levels of energy at which they resonate equally validly. At any moment, the level at which a particle is resonating is a function of probability: one cannot say for sure that the particle is resonating at only one level and not the other. In fact, according to quantum mechanics, a particle may resonate at several levels simultaneously. Similarly, because the level at which a clear light continuum is appearing at any moment is a function of probability, one cannot say that at a particular moment an individual being has only one appearance and not another.

The everlasting continuity of mental activity producing this innately bonded pair of appearances may be unrefined, partially refined, or totally refined, depending on the successions of moments of confusion and its habits that accompany it. The process whereby a continuity of practice with Buddha-figures purifies this factor of Buddha-nature so that it produces an everlasting succession of appearances completely free of accompanying periods of confusion and its habits is the primary subject matter of tantra as discussed in the Sakya school.

### **The Gelug Explanation**

The Gelug tradition follows *The Later Guhyasamaja Tantra* in explaining the meaning of tantra as an everlasting continuity. The main aspect of Buddha-nature emphasized here is the *voidness* (emptiness) of the mental continuum - its absence of existing in impossible ways. Mental continuums do not exist as inherently flawed and impure by nature. They never have and never will. No everlasting continuities of innate features accompany them that, by their own powers, make them exist in that impossible manner. Because this total absence is always the case, when practitioners fully understand this fact, they can stop continuities of confusion and its habits from accompanying their mental continuums so that their Buddha-nature factors may function fully as the enlightening facets of a Buddha. Since mental continuums go on forever as everlasting continuities, their voidness remains always a fact enabling purification and transformation.

The purification method refers to the stages of practice with Buddha-figures. Unlike ordinary people, Buddha-figures do not grow from fetuses, age, or die. Because they are always available in the same form, meditation with them may form an everlasting continuity. The

result of the purification process is the everlasting continuity of Buddhahood.

In short, through an everlasting continuity of meditation practice of bonding with Buddha-figures, tantra practitioners attain the everlasting continuity of Buddhahood, based on the everlasting fact of the voidness of their mental continuums. Because tantra practice entails producing appearances of oneself as Buddha-figures that resemble the resultant state of enlightenment, tantra is called the *resultant vehicle*.

## Summary

The subject matter of tantra concerns everlasting continuities connected with the mental continuum. The continuities include such Buddha-nature factors as basic good qualities, a clear light level of experiencing things, its activity of producing self-appearances, and its voidness. The continuities also include Buddha-figures and the enlightened state. The four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism explain varied ways in which successions of moments of these everlasting continuities intertwine as bases, pathways, and results. They share the feature that tantra involves a pathway of practice with Buddha-figures to purify a basis in order to achieve enlightenment as the result. They also agree that the physical features of the Buddha-figures serve as multivalent representations and provide the warps for interweaving the various themes of sutra practice. The term *tantra* refers to this intricately interwoven subject matter and the texts that discuss it.

## 2 The Authenticity of the Tantras

### The Source of the Tantras

Tantra practice requires conviction in the authenticity of the tantras, correct understanding of their procedures and theory, and certainty of their validity as methods leading to enlightenment. According to the Tibetan tradition, Shakyamuni Buddha himself is the source of the tantras. Many scholars, however, both Western and Buddhist, have disputed this point. By Western scientific standards, however, none of the texts ascribed to Buddha - neither the sutras nor the tantras - can pass the test for authenticity. The question is whether this is crucial to tantra practitioners or other criteria are more relevant to them.

The Tibetans explain that Shakyamuni Buddha taught three vehicles or pathways of practice that lead to the highest spiritual goals. The modest vehicle, *Hinayana*, leads to liberation, while the vast vehicle, *Mahayana*, leads to enlightenment. Although *Hinayana* is a pejorative term appearing only in Mahayana texts, we shall use it here without negative connotation as the widely accepted general term for the eighteen pre-Mahayana Buddhist schools. *Tantrayana*, the tantra vehicle - also called *Vajrayana*, the diamond-strong vehicle - is a subdivision of Mahayana. Hinayana transmits only sutras, while Mahayana transmits both sutras and tantras.

No one recorded Buddha's discourses or instructive dialogues when he held them two and a half thousand years ago, since Indian custom at the time limited the use of writing to business and military affairs. The year after Buddha passed away, however, five hundred of his followers gathered in a council at which three of his main disciples recounted different portions of his words. Subsequently, different groups of monks took responsibility to memorize and periodically to recite specific sections of them. The responsibility passed from one generation of disciples to the next. These words became the Hinayana sutras. Their claim

to authenticity rests exclusively on faith that the three original disciples had perfect recall and that those at the council who corroborated their accounts all remembered the same words. These two provisions are impossible to establish scientifically.

Even if the original transmission were free of corruption, many outstanding disciples in subsequent generations lacked flawless memories. Within a hundred years after Buddha passed away, disagreements arose over many of the Hinayana sutras. Eventually, eighteen schools emerged, each with its own version of what Buddha said. The schools even disagreed as to how many of Buddha's discourses and dialogues were recited at the first council. According to some versions, several of Buddha's disciples were unable to attend and orally transmitted exclusively to their own students the teachings that they recalled. The most outstanding examples are the texts concerning special topics of knowledge (Skt. *abhidharma*). For many years, subsequent generations recited them outside the officially sanctioned meetings and only later councils added them to the Hinayana collection.

The first written scriptures appeared four centuries after Buddha, in the middle of the first century BCE. They were the Hinayana sutras from the *Theravada* school, the line of elders. Gradually, the sutras from the other seventeen Hinayana schools also emerged in written form. Although the Theravada version was the first to appear in writing and although Theravada is the only Hinayana school that survives intact today, these two facts are inconclusive to prove that the Theravada sutras are the authentic words of Buddha.

The Theravada sutras are in the Pali language, while the other seventeen versions are in assorted Indian languages such as Sanskrit and the local dialect of Magadha, the region where Buddha lived. It cannot be established, however, that Shakyamuni taught in only one or all of these Indian tongues. Thus, no version of the Hinayana sutras can claim authenticity on the grounds of language.

Moreover, Buddha advised his disciples to transmit his teachings in whatever forms would be intelligible. He did not wish his followers to freeze his words into a sacred archaic language like that of the ancient Indian scriptures, the *Vedas*. Consistent with this guideline, different portions of Buddha's Hinayana teachings first appeared in writing in diverse Indian languages and in dissimilar styles of composition and grammar to suit the times. The Mahayana sutras and tantras also exhibit a wide diversity of style and language. From a traditional Buddhist viewpoint, diversity of language proves authenticity rather than refutes it.

According to the Tibetan tradition, before Buddha's teachings were put into writing, disciples recited the Hinayana sutras openly at large monastic gatherings, the Mahayana sutras in small private groups, and the tantras in extreme secrecy. The Mahayana sutras first surfaced in the early second century CE, and the tantras began to emerge perhaps as soon as a century later, although any precise dating is impossible. As noted above, according to several Hinayana traditions, private circles orally transmitted even some of the most famous Hinayana texts before the major monastic assemblies accepted them into the corpus of what they openly recited. Therefore, the absence of a text from the first council's agenda does not disprove its authenticity.

Moreover, the participants of the tantra recitation sessions swore vows of secrecy not to reveal the tantras to the uninitiated. Therefore, it is not surprising that personal accounts of the tantra meetings have not appeared. Thus, it is difficult to prove or disprove the prewritten transmission of the tantras and the occurrence of the secret meetings. Moreover, even if one accepts a prewritten oral transmission of the tantras, it is impossible to establish how and

when such transmission began, as is the case with the Hinayana scriptures missing from the first council.

As the Indian master Shantideva argued in *Engaging in Bodhisattva Behavior* (Skt. *Bodhicaryavatara*) any line of reasoning presented to prove or discredit the authenticity of the Mahayana texts applies equally to the Hinayana scriptures. Therefore, the authenticity of the tantras must rely on criteria other than linguistic factors and the date of initial redaction.

## Different Views of Shakyamuni Buddha as a Teacher

A major source of confusion in trying to ascertain the source of the tantras seems to be that Western Buddhologists, Hinayana scholars, and Mahayana authorities each regard Shakyamuni Buddha differently. Buddhologists accept Shakyamuni as a historical figure and a great teacher, but do not consider him as having possessed superhuman powers, as having instructed even nonhumans, and as having continued to teach after his death. Although Hinayana scholars grant that Shakyamuni Buddha had extraordinary powers and could teach all beings, they place little emphasis on these qualities. Moreover, they say that Shakyamuni's passing away marked the end of his teaching activities.

Mahayana scholars of both the sutras and tantras explain that Shakyamuni became a Buddha many eons ago and merely exhibited the stages for becoming enlightened during his lifetime as Prince Siddhartha. He has continued to appear in various manifestations and to teach ever since, using a wide assortment of paranormal abilities. They cite *The Lotus Sutra*, in which Shakyamuni proclaimed that he would manifest in the future as spiritual masters, whose teachings and commentaries would be as authentic as were his own words. Moreover, Mahayana scholars accept that Buddhas can manifest in several forms and places simultaneously, with each emanation teaching a different topic. For example, while appearing as Shakyamuni propounding *The Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) Sutras* at Vultures' Peak in northern India, Buddha also manifested in southern India as Kalachakra and set forth the four classes of tantras at Dhanyakataka Stupa.

The Mahayana vision of how Buddhas teach extends beyond personally instructing disciples. Shakyamuni, for example, also inspired other Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* (those fully dedicated to achieving enlightenment and to helping others) to teach on his behalf, such as when Avalokiteshvara expounded *The Heart Sutra* in Buddha's presence. He also allowed others to teach his intended meaning, such as Vimalakirti in *The Instructions of Vimalakirti Sutra*.

Further, in later times, Shakyamuni and other Buddhas and bodhisattvas permitted to teach on his behalf appeared in pure visions to highly advanced disciples and revealed further sutra and tantra teachings. For example, Manjushri revealed *Parting from the Four Types of Clinging* to Sachen Kunga-nyingpo, the founder of the Tibetan Sakya tradition, and Vajradhara repeatedly appeared to masters in India and Tibet and revealed further tantras. Moreover, Buddhas and bodhisattvas transported disciples to other realms in order to instruct them. For instance, Maitreya led the Indian master Asanga to his pure land and transmitted to him there his *Five Texts*.

Because the audience for Buddha's teachings consisted of a variety of beings, not only humans, some of them safeguarded material for later, more conducive times. For example, the half-human half-serpent *nagas* preserved *The Prajnaparamita Sutras* in their subterranean kingdom beneath a lake until the Indian master Nagarjuna came to retrieve them. Jnana Dakini, a supranormal female adept, kept *The Vajrabhairava Tantra* in Oddiyana until the

Indian master Lalitavajra journeyed there on the advice of a pure vision of Manjushri. Moreover, both Indian and Tibetan masters hid scriptures for safekeeping in physical locations or implanted them as potentials in special disciples' minds. Later generations of masters uncovered them as treasure-texts (*terma*, *gter-ma*). Asanga, for example, buried Maitreya's *Furthest Everlasting Continuum*, and the Indian master Maitripa unearthed it many centuries later. Padmasambhava concealed innumerable tantra texts in Tibet, which subsequent Nyingma masters discovered in the recesses of temples or in their own minds.

When the Tibetan tradition asserts Shakyamuni as the source of the tantras, it means Buddha as described in common by the Mahayana sutra and tantra traditions. If potential tantra practitioners approach the issue of authenticity from the stance of accepting merely the descriptions of the Buddhologists or the Hinayana scholars, then naturally such a Buddha could not have taught the tantras. This is irrelevant, however, to such people. Tantra practitioners do not aim to become the type of Buddhas that Buddhologists and Hinayana scholars describe. Through tantra practice, they aim to become Buddhas as depicted in the Mahayana sutra and tantra teachings. Since they accept Shakyamuni as having been such a Buddha, they certainly accept that he taught the tantras in all the miraculous ways in which tradition relates.

### **The Relation between Buddhist and Hindu Tantra**

Tantra literature began to appear in both the Buddhist and Hindu traditions of India in approximately the third century CE. Precise dates, however, are unavailable and the two traditions undoubtedly predated the appearance of their texts. Although the philosophical and ethical contexts differ, nevertheless devotional practices, yoga exercises, and numerous aspects of earlier matriarchal, tribal, and outcaste customs are prominent in each. For example, both systems include visualization of multiarmed, multifaced figures, manipulation of subtle energies through energy-nodes (Skt. *chakras*), veneration of women, use of bone ornaments and musical instruments, imagery from cremation grounds and slaughterhouses, and transformation of unclean bodily products. Thus, it is difficult to prove that one was the source of a specific feature in the other. One can merely say that the two were contemporaneous movements. Moreover, since Buddhist and Hindu tantra practitioners often frequented the same sacred places, each group probably influenced the other.

Buddhologists and traditional Tantrayana scholars agree that the history of Buddhism chronicles the adaptation of basic Buddhist themes to varying cultural milieus, but they differ in their explanations of the process. Buddhologists do not accept that Buddha taught the tantras. They posit that later masters developed a tantra form of Buddhism and composed its texts to accord with the spirit of the times in India. Traditional Tantrayana scholars, on the other hand, assert that Buddha's supramundane powers enabled him to foresee cultural developments and that he personally taught tantra to suit people of the future. Thus, "when the times were ripe," those who secretly transmitted the tantras - orally or buried in their mental continuums - made them available to receptive practitioners. Alternatively, Buddha revealed the tantras in pure visions to the highly accomplished masters who first recorded them. The explication of each scholarly group accords with its particular view of Buddha and the general Buddhist principle of teaching with skillful means.

### **The Clear Light Continuum as the Deepest Source of the Tantras**

In *An Illuminating Lamp*, the Indian master Chandrakirti explained that statements in the highest tantra texts have several levels of meaning, only some of which may be valid for

specific groups. For example, some levels are valid exclusively for practitioners of highest tantra and some are acceptable as well to followers of the so-called lower Buddhist teachings. Moreover, statements with shared meanings may have both literal and nonliteral levels of interpretation or they may have only one or the other. They have literal meanings if they accord with the experience of the groups that accept them; they have nonliteral meanings if they refer to deeper levels of significance.

Let us apply Chandrakirti's analysis to the statement that Shakyamuni Buddha taught the tantras through extraordinary means such as revelation. Some Buddhologists may accept the statement as having a nonliteral deeper level of meaning, but they would reject a face value interpretation, since revelation is outside the realm of their personal experience. The statement, however, does accord with the experience of numerous masters of the Mahayana sutras, since both they and many tantric masters have received Buddhist teachings through revelation. Thus, followers of both the Mahayana sutras and the tantras accept that the statement has a literal meaning.

Chandrakirti further elaborated that the nonliteral meanings of highest tantra statements point to an ultimate level of meaning concerning the clear light continuum. Numerous tantra texts state that Buddha taught their contents while assuming the form of Samantabhadra, Vajradhara, or the Adibuddha (primordial Buddha) Kalachakra - three Buddha-figures that represent the clear light continuum. Thus, the ultimate nonliteral meaning of the statements is that the deepest source of the tantra teachings is a Buddha's enlightening clear light continuum.

According to the highest tantra explanation of Buddha-nature, especially that of the Nyingma tradition, the refined portion of each person's clear light continuum innately possesses all enlightening qualities. Therefore, just as the confusion accompanying the unrefined portion in each individual may give rise to the misleading teachings of a charlatan, the refined portion may become the source of further Buddha-teachings. Thus, even when someone's clear light continuum is slightly less than totally refined and still flowing as a pathway tantra, if appropriate internal and external conditions are present, its refined portion may spontaneously give rise to new tantra teachings. Before "the times are ripe" and a spontaneous arising occurs, the teachings pass down in a hidden fashion, from one lifetime to the next, as part of the unrealized potentials of the person's clear light continuum. If the person in whom the spontaneous arising occurs accepts the shared Mahayana conceptual framework of revelation, he or she is likely to describe and subjectively experience the phenomenon in terms of this framework. The description and experience will be valid for that person.

Consider, on the other hand, the case of Buddhologists who accept the propositions of transpersonal psychology, for example the assertion that embedded in the potentials of each person's unconscious are the keys for achieving self-realization. Mental blocks, symbolized in myth by subterranean dragon-like creatures such as nagas, guard and keep them submerged. The methods for self-realization remain concealed in the unconscious until an individual reaches a sufficient level of spiritual development and "the times are ripe" for their revelation. Because such Buddhologists consider the unconscious as an equivalent for the clear light continuum, they can accept a shared level of meaning with tantra practitioners concerning the statement that Buddha taught the tantras, although they soundly reject its literal meaning. They could accept that Buddha is the source of tantra teachings only in the sense that Buddha represents the unconscious. In other words, the tantra teachings come from the unconscious of the various masters in whose minds they spontaneously arise.

## The Criteria for Establishing the Authenticity of the Tantras

The main criterion for establishing a teaching as authentically Buddhist is its unbroken lineage tracing back to Buddha - whether one describes Buddha according to classic Buddhology, transpersonal psychology, or the Hinayana, general Mahayana, or highest Tantrayana views. Anyone, however, may claim to have received tantra transmission from Buddha in a pure vision or to have found a buried treasure-text in the ground or in his or her mind. Therefore, other criteria are required to establish the authenticity of the tantras in general and of any of its texts.

In the *Sutra of the Great Final Release from All Sorrows (Mahaparinirvana Sutra)*, Shakyamuni discussed the case in which someone might claim to possess an authentic teaching outside of what he himself had indicated. Buddha prescribed that his followers may accept it as authentic if, and only if, it accords with the contents of the rest of his teachings.

Elaborating on this in *A Commentary on [Dignaga's "Compendium of] Validly Cognizing Minds*, the Indian master Dharmakirti proposed two decisive criteria for authenticity of a Buddhist text. Buddha taught an enormous variety of subjects, but only those themes that repeatedly appear throughout his teachings indicate what Buddha actually intended. These themes include taking safe direction (refuge), understanding the laws of behavioral cause and effect, developing higher ethical discipline, concentration, and discriminating awareness of how things actually exist, and generating love and compassion for all. A text is an authentic Buddhist teaching if it accords with these major themes. The second criterion for authenticity is that correct implementation of its instructions by qualified practitioners must bring about the same results as Buddha repeatedly indicated elsewhere. Proper practice must lead to achieving the ultimate goals of liberation or enlightenment and the provisional goals of spiritual attainment along the way.

The presence of an interweaving of Buddha's major themes and the experience and accomplishments of past and present masters affirm the authenticity of the tantras by these two criteria. These criteria also establish the validity of the tantras, because their correct practice produces their stated results. Moreover, by properly following the tantra instructions, one may prove their authenticity and validity directly oneself.

## The Four Sealing Points for Labeling an Outlook as Based on Enlightening Words

As an elaboration of Dharmakirti's first criterion for authenticity, Maitreya referred, in *The Furthest Everlasting Continuum*, to four sealing points for labeling a view as based on the enlightening words of a Buddha. If a body of teachings contains the four, it carries the seal of authenticity as a Buddhist teaching because its philosophical view accords with the intent of Buddha's words. (1) All affected (conditioned) phenomena are nonstatic (impermanent). (2) All phenomena tainted (contaminated) by confusion entail problems (suffering). (3) All phenomena lack nonimputed identities. (4) A total release from all troubles (Skt. *nirvana*) is a total pacification.

The Buddhist tantric view conforms to the four sealing points. (1) Everything affected by causes and conditions changes from moment to moment. Even with the attainment of enlightenment through the tantra methods, compassion continues to move a Buddha to benefit others in ever-changing ways. (2) As a method for attaining enlightenment, the highest class



of tantra harnesses the energy of disturbing emotions such as longing desire. This method, however, completely rids the practitioner of disturbing emotions and the confusion behind them. One needs to rid oneself of them forever because all tainted phenomena bring on problems. (3) After harnessing the energy underlying disturbing emotions such as longing desire, one uses it to access one's clear light continuum. This is the level of mind most conducive for the nonconceptual realization that all phenomena lack nonimputed identities. (4) From this realization of voidness or total absence, one pacifies and thus rids oneself of further successions of moments of the various levels of confusion, their habits, and the problems they bring. The attainment of this total pacification is a total release from all troubles. Thus, the tantric view qualifies as authentically Buddhist.

## **Developing Firm Conviction in the Authenticity of the Tantras**

To put one's heart fully into tantra practice as a method for achieving liberation and enlightenment, one needs to focus on tantra with firm conviction (*mopa, mos-pa*) that it is an authentic Buddhist teaching. The ability to focus in this manner grows from believing a fact to be true (*daypa, dad-pa*). The Indian master Vasubandhu, in *A Treasure House of Special Topics of Knowledge*, and his brother Asanga, in *An Anthology of Special Topics of Knowledge*, clarified the meaning of these two mental factors or actions that occur while focusing on a fact. Neither of the mental actions refers to focusing with blind faith on something that may or may not be true and which one does not understand.

Believing a fact about something to be true encompasses three aspects. (1) Clearheadedly believing a fact is the mental action that is clear about a fact and which clears the mind of disturbing emotions and attitudes toward its object. For example, when one clearheadedly believes tantra to be a Buddhist teaching, one is clear that tantra uses disturbing emotions, such as longing desire, as a method to rid oneself of disturbing emotions forever. Believing this fact clears the mind of longing desire to experience pleasure through tantra as an end in itself. Thus, clearheadedly believing a fact about something derives from understanding correct information about it.

(2) Believing a fact based on reason is the mental action of considering a fact about something to be true, based on thinking about reasons that prove it. For example, one may be certain that a teaching derives from a source only when one correctly identifies that source. According to the tantras, only Buddha as described in the tantras delivered these teachings. The texts do not assert that Buddha as understood by Hinayana scholars or Western Buddhologists taught them. Moreover, the tantras contain the major themes that Buddha repeatedly taught elsewhere, especially the four sealing points that attest that its philosophical view is based on Buddha's words. Understanding these reasons, one can confidently believe that the tantras are authentically Buddhist.

(3) Believing a fact with an aspiration concerning it is the mental action of considering true both a fact about something and one's ability to achieve the goal of an aspiration one consequently holds about the object. Based on the former two aspects of believing as true the fact that tantra is an authentic Buddhist teaching, one may also believe as true the fact that I may achieve enlightenment through its methods and that I shall therefore strive to practice them correctly.

When one strongly believes, in all three ways, that tantra is authentically Buddhist, one develops firm conviction in this fact. Being firmly convinced of a fact is the mental action that focuses on a fact that one has validly ascertained to be like this and not like that. It makes

one's belief so firm that others' arguments and opinions will not dissuade one. Firm conviction grows from long-term familiarity with the consequences that follow from believing a fact, namely from seeing the benefits one derives from correct tantra practice. Even before beginning tantra practice, however, one needs firm conviction in their validity. Therefore, the preparation ceremony of tantra empowerments (initiations) includes in its first steps an explanation of tantra by the conferring master in order to reaffirm the potential disciples' unyielding conviction.

### 3 The Use of Ritual in Tantra Practice

Although tantra practice is extremely advanced, many Westerners receive tantra empowerments without proper preparation and begin tantra practice without deep understanding. Most, at first, see only the surface features of tantra, such as its emphasis on ritual, its profusion of Buddha-figures, and its use of imagery suggestive of sex and violence. Many find these features intriguing, problematic, or, in any case, confusing. To benefit more fully from their initial practice, such Westerners need to understand and appreciate the significance and purpose of these aspects at least on a superficial level. Once they have overcome their initial fascination, objection, or bewilderment, they may slowly examine the deeper levels that the surface conceals.

#### Western and Asian Forms of Creativity

Tantra practice entails ringing handbells and twirling one's hands with gestures (Skt. *mudras*), while chanting texts - often in Tibetan without translation - and imagining oneself as a Buddha-figure. Some people find such practice captivating and magical since they can lose themselves in exotic worlds of fantasy. Others have problems with it. Working in an integrated fashion with one's body, voice, and imagination like this is a creative artistic process, yet there seems to be a contradiction. Tantra practice is highly structured and ritualistic, without apparent improvisation. For example, one imagines one's body to have specific postures, colors, and numbers of limbs, with specific objects held in each hand and under each foot. One imagines one's speech in the form of *mantras* - set phrases consisting of Sanskrit words and syllables. Even one's manner of helping others follows a standard pattern: one emanates lights of specific colors and figures having particular forms. Many Westerners would like to develop themselves spiritually through exploring and strengthening their creativity, but stylized practice of rituals seems antithetical to imaginativeness. Their compatibility, however, becomes evident when one understands the difference between the Western and Asian concepts of creativity.

Being creative in a contemporary Western sense requires producing something new and unique - whether a work of art or a solution to a problem. Invention is the unquestioned highway to progress. Being creative may also constitute part of a conscious or unconscious quest for ideal beauty, which the ancient Greeks equated with goodness and truth. Moreover, most Westerners regard creativity as an expression of their individuality. Thus, for many, following the prescribed models of ancient rituals as a method for spiritual self-development does not seem creative; it seems restrictive.

Most traditional Asian cultures, for instance that of Tibet, view creativity from a different perspective. Being creative has two major facets: giving life to classical forms and fitting them harmoniously within varying contexts. Consider, for example, Tibetan art. All paintings of Buddha-figures follow grids that indicate the size, shape, position, and color of each element

according to fixed proportions and conventions. The first aspect of creativity lies in the feeling the artists convey through the expression of the faces, the delicacy of the lines, the fineness of detail, the brightness and hue of the colors, and the use of shading. Thus, some paintings of Buddha-figures are more vivid and alive than are others, despite all drawings of the same figure having identical forms and proportions. The second aspect of Asian-style creativity lies in the artists' choice of backgrounds and manner of placing the figures to create harmonious, organic compositions.

Tantra practice with Buddha-figures is an imaginative method of self-development that is creative and artistic in a traditional Asian, not a contemporary Western way. Thus, imagining oneself as a Buddha-figure helping others differs significantly from visualizing oneself as a superhero or superheroine, finding ingenious elegant solutions to challenges in a noble quest for truth and justice. Instead, one tries to fit harmoniously into the set structures of ritual practice, to bring them creatively to life, and to follow their forms in varying situations to correct personal and social imbalances.

### **Creativity and Individuality in Tantra Practice**

Another factor possibly contributing to a seeming contradiction between practicing tantra ritual and being creative is a difference in contemporary Western and traditional Asian views of individuality and the role it plays in self-development. According to Western egalitarian thought, everyone is equal, but each of us has something unique within us - whether we call it a genetic code or a soul - that by its own power makes us special. Once we have "found ourselves," the goal of self-development is to realize our unique creative potentials as individuals so that we may use them fully to make our particular contributions to society. Thus, contemporary Western artists, nearly without exception, sign their works and seek public acclaim for their creative self-expressions. Tibetan artists, by contrast, usually remain anonymous.

From the Buddhist viewpoint, we all have the same potentials of Buddha-nature. We are individuals, yet nothing exists within us that, by its own power, makes us unique. Our individuality derives from the enormous multiplicity of external and internal causes and conditions that affect us in the past, present, and future. The benefit we may bring to society comes from creatively using our potentials within the context of the interdependent nature of life.

Realizing our Buddha-natures, then, differs greatly from finding and expressing our true selves. Since everyone has the same qualities of Buddha-nature, there is nothing special about anyone. There is nothing unique to find or express. To develop ourselves, we simply try to use our universal working materials - our bodies, communicative abilities, minds, and hearts - in skillful ways to match the ever-changing situations we meet, as anyone can. Moreover, we advance toward Buddhahood by imagining ourselves helping others in hidden anonymous manners - through exerting an enlightening influence and inspiring others who are facing difficulties - rather than by picturing ourselves prominently in the foreground, jumping to the rescue.

The extensive use in tantra of ritual practice with Buddha-figures makes sense, then, only within the context of realizing the potentials of Buddha-nature with traditional Asian-style creativity. One brings life to the structure of Buddha-potentials while blending harmoniously with society and the environment and remaining in the background.

## **The Benefits of Tantra Ritual for Busy Westerners**

Although contemporary Westerners may question the relevance of practicing tantra rituals in the classic Tibetan manner as a method for spiritually developing themselves, they may gain many provisional benefits. For example, numerous Westerners lead lives filled with unrelenting pressure to be unique and special and to get ahead. They need continually to develop new ideas and improved products, sell them, and compete with others. Sometimes the tension of having to prove themselves and, ultimately their worth, leads to feelings of alienation and isolation. When the demands for Western productiveness and ingenuity become too stressful, practicing Asian-style creativity in a daily tantra ritual may provide a healthy balance. Fitting oneself harmoniously into the structure of a ritual may help reinforce a feeling of fitting comfortably into family, friendships, society, and culture. Moreover, even if one's daily routine is repetitive and one's job seems dull, one may learn to give them new life through putting vivid expression each day into a tantra ritual.

Further, many Westerners hectically run from one activity or appointment to the next. Each day they use the telephone, email, and the Internet innumerable times, listen to music, watch television, and operate a bewildering array of complex machines and electronic devices. Their lives often feel fragmented, with family, business, social, and recreational needs pulling them in different directions. Tantra practice may help such people to weave together the seemingly discordant aspects of their busy lives. The integration occurs because of harmoniously combining numerous constructive emotions and attitudes and expressing them as an integrated whole in simultaneous physical, verbal, and visualized ways. Doing this in daily meditation reinforces the recognition and conviction that one is by nature an integrated person. Gradually, a feeling of wholeness comes to pervade the entire day.

Moreover, because daily tantra practice is structured and repetitive, it may also provide such people with a stabilizing factor. No matter how frantic each day may seem, daily creation of the peaceful mental and emotional space of a tantra ritual makes their lives flow with stable streams of continuity. Because they discover ever-deeper levels of meaning as they meet the challenge of intertwining the elements of the ritual, they avoid finding the repetition boring. In addition, tantra ritual gives a structure around which to develop discipline that might otherwise be difficult to gain. The discipline acquired in daily repetition of a structured ritual may also help people bring discipline and order into their seemingly chaotic lives.

## **Tantra Ritual as a Venue for Expressing Emotions**

Many contemporary Westerners feel deep respect for someone or something, or gratitude for the joys of life. Yet, if they lack comfortable forms with which to express their uplifting emotions, they may find their feelings so amorphous that they fail to gain spiritual sustenance from them. Tantra ritual may provide such people with forms within which to express their positive emotions. For example, pressing one's palms together - a ritualized expression of respect and gratitude shared by tantra and Western religions - does not constrict uplifting feelings. Rather, it provides a commonly accepted well-traveled channel for these feelings to flow from one's heart and acts as an appropriate container for them. Moreover, because tantra ritual has holistic forms of expression of emotions that integrate physical, verbal, and visualized channels, its continued practice may help emotionally constricted people to overcome alienation from their feelings.

Sometimes uplifting emotions find spontaneous expression in impromptu forms. It would be tedious, however, if one needed to find an innovative way of expressing one's feelings each

time they arose in order for their expression to be heartfelt and sincere. Asian-style creativity in expressing emotions may offer the balance. When uplifting feelings arise, one may spontaneously and creatively give life to ritual forms of expressing them that harmoniously fit the emotions into one's life. If, however, one feels nothing, then to go through the motions of a tantra ritual becomes merely performing an empty ritual. Therefore, tantra rituals include meditating on specific points that help one to generate or access sincere feelings.

## Concluding Remarks

Participating in the rituals of traditional Western religions also provides many of the benefits offered by tantra ritual practice. Many Westerners, however, find that the ceremonies and rituals of their religions of birth lack vitality for them. Since such people have fewer negative associations with tantra rituals, practicing them may afford a more neutral avenue for spiritual development. Many discover that the Asian-style creativity they learn with tantra ritual helps them to find and to put new life into the traditional faiths of their ancestors.

## 4 Buddha-Figures

To overcome fascination, repugnance, or bewilderment about the dazzling array of Buddha-figures used in tantra and about their unusual forms, Westerners need to understand their place and purpose on the Buddhist path. They also need to differentiate them from the Western concepts of self-images, archetypes, and objects of prayer. Otherwise, they may confuse tantra practice with forms of psychotherapy or devotional polytheistic religion and thus deprive themselves of the full benefits of Buddha-figure practices.

### The Use of Buddha-Figures in Practices Shared by Mahayana Sutra and Tantra

To gain mindfulness and concentration, one may focus on sensory awareness, for instance of the physical sensation of the breath passing in and out the nose. In Mahayana sutra and tantra practice, however, visualized Buddha-figures more commonly serve as objects of focus for gaining single-minded concentration. Such practice accords with *An Anthology of Special Topics of Knowledge*, in which Asanga defined concentration as the mental factor that keeps mental awareness focused on constructive objects or in constructive states of mind. The Indian Mahayana master defined concentration in this way because of the many advantages gained from developing it specifically with mental awareness.

For example, becoming a Buddha requires absorbed concentration on love, compassion, and the correct understanding of how things actually exist. If one has already developed concentration with mental awareness, one may apply it to these mental and emotional states more easily than if one has developed concentration through sensory awareness. Moreover, since Buddha-figures - especially the figure of Shakyamuni - represents enlightenment, focusing on them helps practitioners to remain aimed in the safe direction of refuge. It also helps them to maintain mindfulness of the *bodhichitta* motivation to achieve enlightenment for the sake of benefiting others as much as is possible.

Both sutra and tantra Mahayana practices include visualizing Buddha-figures in front of oneself, on the top of one's head, or in one's heart. Tantra practice is unique, however, in its training in self-visualization as a Buddha-figure. Imagining oneself as having the enlightening physical, communicative, and mental faculties of a Buddha-figure acts as a powerful cause for

actualizing and achieving these qualities.

## **Buddha-Figures and Self-Images**

Most people have one or more self-images with which they identify. The images may be positive, negative, or neutral, and either accurate or inflated. Buddha-figures, on the other hand, are images that represent only accurate positive qualities. Through understanding Buddha-nature, tantra practitioners use them to replace their ordinary self-images as an integral part of the path to enlightenment.

Buddha-figures represent the totality of all the potentials of Buddha-nature - on the basis level when they are unrefined, on the pathway level when they are partially refined, and on the resultant level of enlightenment when they are totally refined. Moreover, most figures also represent a specific aspect of Buddha-nature on basis, pathway, and resultant levels. For instance, Avalokiteshvara represents compassion based on the natural warmth of the heart, and Manjushri stands for wisdom based on the innate clarity of the mind. Identifying with the figure helps to enhance the particular quality that it embodies.

In identifying with Buddha-figures, however, tantra practitioners do not inflate themselves with wishful thinking. They base their identifications on the potentials of their Buddha-natures that allow them fully to realize these qualities for everyone's sake. Alternatively, they understand that the Buddha-figures and the good qualities they incorporate are refined quantum levels at which their own appearances and qualities validly resonate.

For example, people may have self-images of being emotionally stiff or mentally slow. They may in fact be tense or dull, but identifying with these qualities as their self-images may easily depress them and dampen their efforts to benefit others. If, on the other hand, they imagine themselves as Buddha-figures whose hearts are warm and whose minds are lucid, they no longer worry about being inadequate. The visualization helps them to access innate positive qualities, especially in times of need.

Furthermore, people usually regard their self-images as their true and inherent identities. It is who they believe they really are, no matter what the circumstances may be. Tantra practitioners, on the other hand, do not conceive of Buddha-figures as giving them their inherent identities by their own powers, independently of the practice required to actualize the qualities that they represent.

Closely bonding and imaginatively transforming into a Buddha-figure differ in several other ways from improving a self-image casually or systematically. By receiving empowerments before undertaking tantra self-transformation, practitioners formally activate and reinforce the innate potentials that enable them to become like these figures. They gain conscious experiences that the figures and their qualities exist inseparably from themselves and that the voidness of their mental continuums allows the transformation to occur. The vows taken during the ceremony establish, structure, and secure the close bond. Moreover, the relationship established with the empowering tantric master provides ongoing inspiration to nourish and stimulate the potentials throughout the path.

## **Buddha-Figures and Archetypes**

According to Jungian psychology, archetypes are symbols for fundamental patterns of thought and behavior that are present in the collective part of everyone's unconscious. They derive

from the collective experience of either humanity in general or a particular culture or historical era, and they account for people's responding to situations in ways similar to their ancestors. Archetypal symbols, such as the loving parent, the wise elder, the brave hero, or the wicked witch, find expression in myths and fantasies. Their forms may differ from one society or time to another, but the patterns of thought and behavior that they symbolize remain the same. Psychological maturity comes from raising to consciousness the intuitive knowledge symbolized by the entire spectrum of archetypes and incorporating it harmoniously into one's life.

Some symbols convey meanings that are evident to people from any culture - either at first sight or upon simple explanation. For instance, a mother feeding an infant universally symbolizes nurturing love. Other symbols, however, do not clearly suggest what they signify. The four-armed figure of Avalokiteshvara, for example, does not obviously suggest compassion to people from non-Buddhist cultures. The meanings that archetypes symbolize are, for the most part, quite obvious; whereas the meanings that Buddha-figures symbolize are not obvious at all.

Furthermore, archetypes are universal features of everyone's collective unconscious, whereas Buddha-figures are collective features associated with everyone's clear light continuum. The clear light continuum is not an equivalent for the collective unconscious. Although both mental faculties have features of which one is normally unaware, the clear light continuum is the subtlest level of the mental continuum and provides an individual with continuity from one lifetime to the next. The collective unconscious, on the other hand, explains the continuity of mythic patterns over successive generations. It manifests in each person, but only in humans, and does not pass on through a process of rebirth.

Moreover, Buddha-figures are neither concrete nor abstract representations findable in a clear light continuum. Nor are they findable elsewhere. Rather, the Buddha-figures represent the innate potentials of everyone's clear light continuum to give rise to patterns of thought and behavior, whether the potentials are unrealized, partially realized, or fully realized. They represent the potentials of general positive qualities, such as compassion or wisdom, rather than the thought and behavior of specific familial, social, or mythical roles. The Buddha-figures associated with disturbing emotions such as anger represent only the transformation and constructive use of the energy underlying the emotions, rather than the destructive negative emotions themselves.

Moreover, Buddhism clarifies the meaning of the Buddha-figures' being collective. Buddhism accepts the existence of universals and particulars. Universals are metaphysical abstractions imputed on sets of similar items to organize them into categories delineated by words and concepts. For example, all people have similar-looking features on their faces through which they breathe. The universal *nose* is an imputation on these features allowing them all to share the name *nose*. Yet everyone's nose is individual and one person's nose is not another's. A universal nose does not exist somewhere on its own as an ideal model, separate from particular noses, nor do people reach the universal nose through contemplation of their own noses. The same is true with Buddha-figures and the Buddha-nature potentials that they represent. Universal Buddha-figures do not exist as individual beings separate from the clear light continuums of individuals. Nor do people gain access to universal Buddha-figures through the Buddha-figures of their clear light continuums, like reaching God through the spirit of the divine within their souls.

Furthermore, unlike archetypes, Buddha-figures do not come to consciousness spontaneously in dreams, fantasies, or visions unless people have thoroughly familiarized themselves with their forms during their lifetimes or in recent previous lives. This holds true also for *bardo*, the periods in between death and rebirth. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* describes the Buddha-figures that appear during bardo and advises those in the in-between state to recognize the figures as mere appearances produced by their clear light continuums. The people for whom the instructions pertain, however, are persons who have practiced tantra during their lifetimes. Those without previous tantra practice normally experience their continuums giving rise to other appearances during bardo, not those of Buddha-figures.

## **Buddha-Figures as Emanations of Buddhas**

Although Buddha-figures represent both the totality and specific aspects of the basis, pathway, and resultant Buddha-natures, Buddha-figures are not merely symbols. In *An Extensive Explanation of (Chandrakirti's) "Illuminating Lamp,"* Sherab-senggey, Gelug founder of the Lower Tantric College, explained that Buddha-figures have the same mental continuums as Buddhas. This is because they are emanations of Buddhas' enlightening clear light continuums. For example, although Shakyamuni attained enlightenment eons ago, he emanated himself as Prince Siddhartha and gave the appearance of becoming a Buddha during his lifetime. He did this to help beginners to gain confidence that practicing the teachings brings results. Similarly, Shakyamuni assumed the form of Vajradhara when he imparted *The Guhyasamaja Tantra* and simultaneously emanated himself as Vajrapani, the compiler of the teachings. Buddha merely gave the appearance that the Buddha-figure Vajrapani was someone different from Vajradhara in order to inspire beginners also to listen attentively to the teachings and to remember and practice them conscientiously. Shakyamuni, Vajradhara, and Vajrapani were, in fact, all the same person.

Buddhas emanate Buddha-figures from their clear light continuums to benefit beings in many ways, particularly by serving as representations of the various factors of Buddha-nature. Through realizing the inseparability between Buddha-figures and the clear light continuums of the Buddhas and of the tantric masters, practitioners realize that both the imagined and actual Buddha-figures they bond with in meditation are emanations of their own clear light continuums. Just as every clear light continuum can emanate an appearance of a nose without one person's nose being another's, similarly every clear light continuum can emanate Buddha-figures, although the Buddha-figures of one clear light continuum are not the Buddha-figures of another. The realization of the inseparability of the Buddha-figures and their own clear light continuums helps practitioners to actualize the Buddha-nature factors that the figures represent.

## **Buddha-Figures as Objects for Prayers**

Mahayana sutra and tantra practitioners often pray to Buddha-figures, such as Tara. The two truths or facts about things, which the Indian master Nagarjuna elaborated in *Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*, shed light on the phenomenon. According to the interpretation common to sutra and tantra, the conventional truth about something is how it appears to everyday beings. Its deepest truth is how it actually exists, a fact about an object that its appearance conceals.

From the conventional viewpoint of everyday people, Buddha-figures such as Tara appear to be independently existent beings with the powers to grant petitioners' wishes. In deepest fact, however, there is no independently existent Tara: all Taras are emanations of the clear light continuums of the Buddhas and of the people who pray to Tara. Moreover, even as



emanations of clear light continuums, Buddha-figures lack the ability to bring about results, such as granting wishes, by their own powers, from their own sides, independently of anything else. Buddhism argues that such abilities are impossible. Nevertheless, offering prayers to Tara may help to bring about effects, whether or not one recognizes Tara as an emanation of Buddha or as an emanation of one's own clear light continuum and representing its potentials. This is because the strong wish of prayer acts as a circumstance for activating one's innate potentials.

For example, devotees commonly pray to Tara, as an external being, for protection from fear. Tara may inspire people to be courageous, but the main cause for their overcoming fears is the potentials of their clear light continuums for understanding how things actually exist and the courage that this naturally brings. Inspiration (*chinlab*, *byin-rlabs*; Skt. *adhishtana*, blessing), however, is required for devotees to activate and to use their potentials, and inspiration may come from either external or internal sources. An important Buddha-nature factor, in fact, is the ability of a clear light continuum to be inspired or uplifted.

### Coarse and Subtle Emanations of Buddha-Figures

To benefit others, Buddhas emanate multiple appearances of themselves in a variety of coarse and subtle forms. They assume an array of subtle bodies (Skt. *sambhogakaya*) to teach arya bodhisattvas - the only ones able to see such forms. *Aryas* (noble ones) are highly realized beings with direct, straightforward, nonconceptual perception and understanding of how things exist. Buddhas take an assortment of coarser bodies (Skt. *nirmanakaya*) in order to benefit ordinary beings. Any Buddha may emanate coarse or subtle bodies in the forms of any Buddha-figure or everyday being, or even of another Buddha. The same is true of Buddha-figures when appearing as if they were individual enlightened beings. Only those who are receptive to receiving help or teachings, however, are able to meet Buddhas in any form and derive the full benefit.

Buddhas and their Buddha-figure emanations reside in their own *Buddha-fields*. Buddha-fields are special realms unassociated with the confusion of uncontrollably recurring existence (Skt. *samsara*). They are the *pure lands* where Buddhas and Buddha-figures manifest in subtle forms and teach arya bodhisattvas the final steps to enlightenment. Since Buddha-fields are beyond the common experience of Buddhologists and Hinayana adherents, their literal existence would naturally be unacceptable to them. Mahayana sutra and tantra practitioners, however, regard them as actually existing, although no one can reach them without the prerequisite realizations. Even great masters cannot bring the mental continuums of freshly deceased persons to pure lands unless the deceased have built up the potentials for this from their own practices.

The nonliteral ultimate meaning of Buddha-fields is the clear light continuum of each individual being. Within the sphere of each being's clear light continuum, beyond the confusion of uncontrollable existence, dwell the various aspects of Buddha-nature, represented by Buddha-figures. Arya bodhisattvas on the path of highest tantra - the only practitioners with nonconceptual meditative access to their clear light continuums - gain final actualization of their Buddha-natures while in this state.

Sometimes Buddha-figures come from their Buddha-fields in the subtle forms of bodhisattvas and request Shakyamuni to impart the various sutras and tantras, as when Vajrapani requested *A Concert of Names of Manjushri (Praises to the Names of Manjushri)*. As bodhisattvas, they may also attend and compile Buddha's discourses, as Vajrapani did for *The Guhyasamaja*

*Tantra*, or give teachings in Shakyamuni's stead, as Avalokiteshvara did for *The Heart Sutra*. In such cases, as explained above, the Buddha-figures and Shakyamuni share the same mental continuum.

Some of the coarse bodies that Buddhas or Buddha-figures emanate from their Buddha-fields were actual historical persons, such as Padmasambhava, the Indian master responsible for the first spread of Buddhism to Tibet. From the viewpoint of conventional truth, these great beings seemed to have individual mental continuums and appeared as such to ordinary beings, who could understand only this truth about them. A deeper truth about them was that their mental continuums were one with the Buddhas and Buddha-figures of whom they were emanations. For Buddhologists and Hinayana adherents, only the first statement about these historical figures is true. For Mahayana practitioners, both statements are fact.

Tantra practice includes visualizing oneself in the forms of certain historical figures regarded as Buddha-figure emanations, such as Padmasambhava, his female partner Yeshey Tsogyel, or the Second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi. Not all masters regarded as Buddha-figure emanations, however, serve as forms for tantra self-visualization, for example the Dalai Lamas as Avalokiteshvaras. Moreover, political reasons may have motivated the Tibetans to address honorifically certain rulers as Buddha-figure emanations, such as the Manchu emperors of China as Manjushris and the Russian czars as Taras. Tantra practice does not include such persons. Regarding them as emanations, however, accords with the general Mahayana advice to avoid speaking badly of anyone, because one can never tell who may be a bodhisattva emanation.

Further, some coarse Buddha-figure emanations that the Tibetans consider as having been historical figures would be hard to confirm by Western standards. A prominent example is Tara. Tara appeared as an individual who during a lifetime as a woman developed bodhichitta and became a bodhisattva. She vowed to continue taking rebirth ever after as a woman and to achieve enlightenment in a female form to encourage women to follow the path.

### **Buddha-Figures as Containers for Practice**

Buddha-figures are more than emanations representing various factors of Buddha-nature; they also serve as multipurpose containers. The motivation for Mahayana practice is to become a Buddha for the benefit of all. Becoming a Buddha requires actualizing enlightening physical, communicative, and mental faculties. Such faculties need the container of a physical form. Visualizing oneself as a Buddha-figure acts as a cause for achieving a physical container - the enlightening body of a Buddha. It also serves as a fitting container for the various tantra practices for achieving enlightenment, such as visualizing the chakras and channels of the subtle body.

Like all Buddhas, Buddha-figures appear in a vast network of assorted forms to benefit others in varying ways. For example, tantra encompasses six classes of practice according to the Nyingma system and four according to the Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug schools. Moreover, each Tibetan tradition transmits several styles of practice for each tantra class. Any Buddha-figure may serve as a container for any number of practices from any number of Tibetan traditions and any number of tantra classes. In any of these practices, the same Buddha-figure may appear in different forms, in different postures, with different colors and numbers of faces and limbs. The details of the appearances depend on the number of aspects of Buddha-nature or enlightenment that the figure and its features represent. For instance, Avalokiteshvara appears in all tantra classes, in all traditions, alone or as part of a couple, sitting or standing, white or

red, with one or eleven heads, and with two, four, or a thousand arms. Regardless of the form or the practice, however, Avalokiteshvara still serves as a container for focusing on compassion.

## **Cultural Diversity in Buddha-Figures**

Some Westerners feel that the Buddha-figures are too alien to meet the needs of Western tantra practitioners. They would like modifications in their forms. Before acting hastily, they might benefit from studying the historical precedents.

As tantra practice spread from India to East Asia and Tibet, some of the Buddha-figures indeed altered forms. Most of the changes, however, were minor. For instance, the facial features matched those of the local races and, in the case of China, the clothing, postures, and hairdos corresponded as well. The most radical alteration was with Avalokiteshvara transforming from male to female in Central and East Asia. A traditional Mahayana explanation for the phenomenon is that Buddhas are masters of skillful means and therefore they manifest in different forms to suit varied societies. Chinese associate compassion more comfortably with women than with men. Buddhologists assert that tantric masters made these modifications themselves, using skillful means to adapt the forms to cultural tastes. The Mahayana retort is that the masters received inspiration and guidance for the changes from the Buddha-figures themselves, in pure visions and other revelations. In either case, the point in common is that the Buddhist principle of skillful means requires the modification of forms to suit and thus benefit different cultures.

The changes that occurred in the Buddha-figures fit within the domain of Asian-style creativity. They gave new life to standard forms and harmonized them with varied cultural backgrounds. Consistent with this trend, the Buddha-figures in the West may reasonably take on musculature and Western facial features. However, since Westerners are used to cultural diversity, it is probably unnecessary that the Buddha-figures change their clothing to modern fashion. Further, in light of the contemporary Western acceptance of sexual equality, it also seems unlikely that gender changes need to occur.

Despite modifications, certain features of the Buddha-figures remained untouched as tantra spread from one Asian culture to another. The most noticeable one is the retention of multiple limbs. Avalokiteshvara still manifests with a thousand arms, whether with a male body in India or a female one in China. Thousand-armed people are alien to the common experience of any culture. Yet, as a symbol of the compassion to help others in a thousand ways, the significance of a thousand arms is understandable to anyone.

Moreover, manifold faces and limbs stand for multiple Buddha-nature aspects and realizations along the path. For example, it is difficult to maintain simultaneous mindfulness of twenty-four qualities and realizations in an abstract manner. By representing them graphically with twenty-four arms, it is easier to keep them in mind all at once by visualizing oneself with an array of arms. To eliminate the multilimbed features of the Buddha-figures in order to make visualization of them more comfortable for Westerners would sacrifice this essential facet of tantra practice - the interweaving of sutra themes.

## **The Possible Use of Western Religious Icons as Buddha-Figures**

When tantra practices become so widely publicized and well known that they become banal, they stop inspiring practitioners. At such times, Buddhas reveal new forms of practice to

tantric masters in pure visions. The revelations often include slightly different forms of the Buddha-figures. His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has explained that undoubtedly the phenomenon will continue in the future. His prediction makes sense in light of the commercialization of Tibetan Buddhism and the appearance of merchandise such as Kalachakra T-shirts. Buddha-figures and their practices need to remain private and special in order for them to retain their sacredness. If practitioners see babies dribbling food on their Kalachakra T-shirts, they may find visualizing themselves as Kalachakras less than inspiring. If new forms of Buddha-figures arise in the West, however, what forms will be the most helpful and inspiring?

Some Westerners feel that visualizing themselves as familiar Western religious icons, such as Jesus or Mary, rather than as alien Indian figures, may be a skillful means for adapting tantra to the West. After all, they argue, Jesus and Mary represent love and compassion as much as Avalokiteshvara and Tara do. Moreover, if Buddhas can emanate in any form, they can surely emanate as Jesus or Mary to benefit Westerners. Again, one needs to keep in mind historical precedents.

The Manchu rulers of China tried to unify the Mongols and Han Chinese under their rule by combining Tibetan Buddhism with Confucianism. Thus, for purely political reasons, they called Confucius an emanation of Manjushri, commissioned the composition of tantric rituals for making offerings to the bodhisattva Confucius, and sponsored ceremonies in Beijing based on these texts. The rituals, however, did not entail visualizing oneself as the Buddha-figure Confucius/Manjushri.

In India, however, a few Hindu deities, such as elephant-headed Ganesh (the god of prosperity) and Sarasvati (the goddess of musical and artistic expression) did appear as Buddha-figures for self-visualization in tantra practice. As mentioned above, practitioners of Hindu and Buddhist tantra intermingled in ancient India and shared many features of practice. Not only did Hindu deities appear as emanations of Buddha in Buddhist practice, but also, correspondingly, Hinduism included Buddha as one of the ten manifestations (Skt. *avatar*) of Vishnu, one of its main gods. All-inclusiveness is a characteristic shared by most Indian religions.

Monotheistic religions, on the other hand, regard themselves as upholders of the exclusive truth. Their leaders would undoubtedly take offense at nontheistic religions such as Buddhism declaring their most sacred figures emanations of Buddha and incorporating them into their practices, particularly into practices involving sexual imagery. One of the bodhisattva vows is to avoid doing anything that would cause others to disparage Buddha's teachings. Adapting Jesus and Mary for tantra self-visualization, then, might harm interfaith relations.

Moreover, features associated with the image of Jesus, such as the cross and the crown of thorns, have deep significance within the Christian context. Even if Western Buddhism were to adapt them as Buddhist symbols, most Western practitioners would find difficulty in divorcing them from Christian connotations. Because most symbols involved with Buddha-figures, such as lotuses and gems, are mainly free of associations for the majority of Westerners, they are open to carry their intended meanings and thus more suitable for use in tantra practice. Therefore, if new forms of Buddha-figures emerge in the future to rejuvenate the practices, they will probably follow precedent and be minor variations on previous forms. Unlike products on the free market, however, there will be no need for new improved models each year.

## 5 Tantric Imagery

### Survey of the Misunderstanding

One of the more perplexing and most easily misunderstood aspects of tantra is its imagery suggestive of sex, devil-worship, and violence. Buddha-figures often appear as couples in union and many have demonic faces, stand enveloped in flames, and trample helpless beings beneath their feet. Seeing these images horrified early Western scholars, who often came from Victorian or missionary backgrounds.

Even nowadays, some people believe that the couples signify the sexual exploitation of women. Others imagine that couples in union represent the transcendence of all duality to the point that there is no difference between "good" and "bad." They think that, consequently, tantra is immoral and not only sanctions, but even encourages usage of alcohol and drugs, and hedonistic, criminal, and despotic behavior. Some go as far as accusing well-respected tantric masters of plotting to take over the world.

Westerners were not the first to declare tantra a degenerate form of Buddhism. When tantra originally came to Tibet in the mid-eighth century, many took the imagery literally as granting free license to ritual sex and blood sacrifice. Subsequently, in the early ninth century, a religious council banned further official translation of tantra texts and prohibited the inclusion of tantra terminology in its *Great (Sanskrit-Tibetan) Dictionary*. One of the main incentives for the Tibetans' inviting Indian masters for the second spread of Buddhism in Tibet was to clarify misunderstanding about sex and violence in tantra.

Not all Westerners who had early contact with tantra found the imagery depraved. A number misunderstood it in other ways. Some, for example, felt that the sexual imagery symbolized the psychological process of integrating the masculine and feminine principles within each person. Others, like many early Tibetans, found the images erotic. Even now, some people turn to tantra hoping to find new and exotic sexual techniques or spiritual justification for their obsession with sex. Still others found the terrifying figures alluring for their promise of granting extraordinary powers. Such people followed in the footsteps of the thirteenth-century Mongol conqueror Kublai Khan, who adopted Tibetan tantra primarily in the wish that it would help him gain victory over his foes.

Misunderstanding about tantra, then, is a perennial problem. The reason for tantra's insistence on secrecy about its teachings and images is to avoid such misconceptions, not to hide something perverse. Only those with sufficient preparation in study and meditation have the background to understand tantra within its proper context.

### Couples in Union

Raising to consciousness and integrating the masculine and feminine principles are important and helpful parts of the path to psychological maturity as taught by several therapeutic schools based on the works of Jung. To ascribe Buddhist tantra as an ancient source of this approach, however, is an interpolation. The misunderstanding comes from seeing Buddha-figures as couples in union and incorrectly translating the Tibetan words for the couple, *yab-yum*, as male and female. The words actually mean father and mother. Just as a father and mother in union are required for producing a child, likewise method and wisdom in union are required for giving birth to enlightenment.

Method, the father, stands for bodhichitta and various other causes taught in tantra for gaining the enlightening physical bodies of a Buddha or a Buddha's omniscient awareness of conventional truth. Wisdom, the mother, stands for the realization of voidness with various levels of mind, as causes for a Buddha's enlightening mind or a Buddha's omniscient awareness of deepest truth. Gaining the union of a Buddha's physical bodies and mind or a Buddha's omniscient awareness of the conventional and deepest truths of all things requires practicing a union of method and wisdom. Because traditional Indian and Tibetan cultures do not share a Biblical sense of prudishness about sex, they do not have taboos about using sexual imagery to symbolize this union.

One level of meaning of father as method is blissful awareness. The union of father and mother signifies blissful awareness conjoined with the realization of voidness - in other words, the realization or understanding of voidness with a blissful awareness. Here, blissful awareness does not refer to the bliss of orgasmic release as in ordinary sex, but to a blissful state of mind achieved through advanced yoga methods for bringing the energy-winds (*lung*, *rlung*; Skt. *prana*) into the central energy-channel. A prolonged succession of moments of such a mental state is conducive for reaching the subtlest level of the mental continuum, one's clear light continuum - the most efficient level of experiencing for realizing voidness. The embrace of father and mother, then, also symbolizes the blissful aspect of the union of method and wisdom, but in no way signifies the use of ordinary sex as a tantra method.

In the final stages of the path of the highest class of tantra, the advanced yoga methods for drawing the energy-winds into the central channel do entail a man and woman sitting in a posture of union. Far from being exploitative, however, both partners are required to have reached the same advanced level of spiritual development. This includes both having reached the level of control of their subtle energies and their minds so that even though the bottom tips of their central channels touch, both avoid orgasmic release.

Sitting in such a yogic posture while engaging in complex visualizations and meditating on voidness is only done to enhance the practice on the most advanced levels. It is not done as the main practice or engaged in regularly, and is certainly not a practice for earlier stages of the path.

Moreover, to avoid any possibility of misogyny, machismo, or male chauvinism, one of the tantric vows is to refrain from ever speaking badly or mistreating women.

## **Nonduality**

Every tantric initiation requires the taking of vows to refrain from destructive behavior. In all classes of tantra, practitioners take the bodhisattva vows to refrain from behavior that would either harm others or damage their abilities to help others. The required foundation is having taken refuge (having put a safe direction in their lives) and upholding some level of lay or monastic vow, such as refraining from taking life, stealing, lying, engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior, and taking intoxicants. Initiation into the two highest classes of tantra also requires taking the tantric vows, to refrain from behaving in ways that would damage their spiritual progress, such as neglecting to remain mindful of voidness each day.

Voidness does not mean that everything, including ethics, in actuality do not exist. It never negates the conventional distinctions between destructive and constructive behavior, or the functioning of behavioral cause and effect. Nonduality, as represented by couples in union, means that categories such as "destructive" and "constructive" do not exist independently of

each other. They are designated in relation to each other and in relation to their causes and effects. Thus, going beyond dualism does not mean gaining authority for indulging in selfish or exploitative behavior and for abrogating responsibility for one's actions. It means gaining awareness of the totality of reality, with a vision of the interrelatedness and interdependence of everything.

Moreover, when tantric practitioners accept a small taste of specially consecrated alcohol and meat during certain rituals, this symbolizes the purification and usage of the subtle energies in their bodies for reaching enlightenment. As in the taking of specially consecrated bread and wine during a Christian communion, the symbolic act hardly sanctions alcohol or drug abuse.

## Peaceful and Forceful Figures

Buddha-figures may be peaceful or forceful, as indicated on the simplest level by their having smiles on their faces or fangs bared. More elaborately, forceful figures have terrifying faces, hold an arsenal of weapons, and stand surrounded by flames. Descriptions of them specify in gory detail various ways in which they smash their enemies. Part of the confusion that arises about the role and intent of these forceful figures comes from the usual translations of the word for them, *trowo* (*khro-bo*, Skt. *krodha*), as angry or wrathful deities.

For many Westerners with a Biblical upbringing, the term *wrathful deity* carries the connotation of an almighty being with righteous vengeful anger. Such a being metes out divine punishment as retribution for evildoers who have disobeyed its laws or somehow offended it. For some people, a wrathful deity may even connote the Devil or a demon working on the side of darkness. The Buddhist concept has nothing to do with such notions. Although the Tibetan term derives from one of the usual words for anger, anger here has more the connotation of repulsion - a rough state of mind directed toward an object with the wish to get rid of it. Thus, a more appropriate translation for "trowo" might be a *forceful figure*.

Forceful figures symbolize the strong energetic means often required to break through mental and emotional blocks that prevent one from being clearheaded or compassionate. The enemies the figures smash include dullness, laziness, and self-centeredness. The weapons they use span positive qualities developed along the spiritual path, such as concentration, enthusiasm, and love. The flames that surround them are the different types of deep awareness (*yeshey*, *ye-shes*; Skt. *jnana*, wisdom) that burn away obscurations. Imagining oneself as a forceful figure helps to harness the mental energy and resolve to overcome "internal enemies."

From the Buddhist perspective, the subtlest energy of the clear light continuum may be peaceful or forceful. When associated with confusion, the peaceful and forceful energies and the emotional states that they underlie become destructive. For example, peaceful energy becomes lethargic and forceful energy becomes angry and violent. When rid of confusion, the energies may readily combine with concentration and discriminating awareness (*sherab*, *shes-rab*; Skt. *prajna*, wisdom), so that they are available for positive, constructive use. With peaceful energy, one may calm oneself and others to deal with difficulties in a levelheaded manner. With forceful energy, one may rouse oneself and others to have more strength, courage, and intensity of mind to overcome dangerous situations.

## Concluding Remarks

Contemporary Western advertising and entertainment draw their success partially from most people's fascination with sex and violence. For some persons, this fascination also attracts

## Making Sense of Tantra

them to tantra. Their attraction, however, may lead them to higher aims.

In general, watching, hearing about, or engaging in sex and violence excites people's energies. Hormones flow and the mind becomes intense. The violence need not be gory, but may include extreme or contact sports. Some people, of course, experience aversion or are so jaded by such things that they feel nothing. Consider, however, those who become fascinated or obsessed. If confusion accompanies the energies aroused by their passions, such people may cause problems for themselves or others, for example by being rowdy. If, on the other hand, people accompany the energies with mindfulness, concentration, and insight, they may transform and use the energies for positive aims. Tantra provides skillful methods for bringing about the transformation, specifically for the sake of helping others. To derive the full benefits of tantra practice, however, requires deeper understanding of the processes involved.



# Part II: Why Tantra Is More Efficient Than Sutra

## 6 Gelug Presentation of Tantra in General

[As background, see: [Basic Features of Tantra](#) {1}.]

### Methodology

Tantra is well known as being a quicker and more efficient method for achieving enlightenment than is sutra. To appreciate tantra and put full enthusiasm into its practice in a realistic manner, it is important to know what makes tantra so special. We can discuss this on several levels, depending on the tantra class and specific tantra. Here, however, let us speak of only three levels:

1. tantra in general - common to all four tantra classes,
2. anuttarayoga tantra in general - common to the main anuttarayoga tantras, such as Guhyasamaja,
3. Kalachakra tantra.

On each level, we shall analyze four reasons for its enhanced speed:

1. There are closer analogies within the practice.
2. There is a closer union of method and wisdom.
3. There is a special basis for voidness used for gaining the understanding of voidness.
4. There is a special level of mental activity used for perceiving voidness.

We shall use as our basis the Gelug presentation of the subject matter, as found in *A Grand Presentation of the Stages of Hidden Mantra* (*sNgags-rim chen-mo*) by the fourteenth-century master Tsongkhapa (*Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang grags-pa*). The four-point analysis has been extrapolated from salient points in this text, although Tsongkhapa himself has not structured his discussion in this manner. As a supplement, we shall indicate the features unique to the explanations given in the non-Gelug systems - Sakya, Kagyu, and Nyingma - when they significantly differ.

### (1) Closer Analogies

The practices of both bodhisattva sutra and general tantra act as causes for reaching the goal of enlightenment, with the attainment of the physical corpuses (Skt. *rupakaya*, form bodies) and omniscient all-loving mental activity (Skt. *dharmakaya*) of a Buddha. The causal practices in each, however, resemble the goal to different degrees.

### In Sutra

The bodhisattva sutras discuss the two enlightenment-building networks (*tshogs-gnyis*, the two collections) as causes for achieving a body and mind of a Buddha. These are the networks of positive force (*bsod-nams*, Skt. *punya*, merit, positive potential) and deep awareness (*ye-shes*, Skt. *jnana*, wisdom, insight). Each is a *network* in the sense that its constituents connect with and reinforce one another, rather than just accumulate as members of a passive

collection.

We build up the two enlightenment-building networks exclusively with a bodhichitta motivation beforehand and a dedication to enlightenment afterward. Otherwise, our constructive (*dge-ba*, virtuous) actions and meditation on the nature of reality constitute only samsara-building networks of positive force and deep awareness. Such networks serve merely as causes for achieving a body and mind in one of the better rebirth states.

The minimum level of bodhichitta required for our constructive actions and meditation to constitute enlightenment-building networks is a labored (*rtsol-bcas*) state, reached by relying on a line of reasoning. With the attainment of unlabored (*rtsol-med*) bodhichitta, which arises without such reliance, we become *bodhisattvas*.

An extensive enlightenment-building network of positive force serves as the obtaining cause (*nyer-len-gyi rgyu*) for the body of a Buddha. An *obtaining cause* is the item from which we obtain the result. It functions as the natal source (*rdzas*, natal substance) giving rise to the result as its successor. It ceases to exist simultaneously with the arising of its result. For example, a seed is the obtaining cause for a sprout. Obtaining causes and their results, however, do not need to be forms of physical phenomena. Today's understanding of a Dharma point, for instance, is the obtaining cause that gives rise to tomorrow's understanding of it.

Obtaining causes need simultaneously acting conditions (*lhan-cig byed-rkyen*) in order to give rise to their results. Here, an enlightenment-building network of positive potential requires as a simultaneously acting condition an enormous enlightenment-building network of deep awareness. Likewise, an extensive enlightenment-building network of deep awareness, as the obtaining cause for the mind of a Buddha, requires a vast enlightenment-building network of positive force as its simultaneously acting condition. The pair of enlightenment-building networks is required for achieving either of the two, a body or a mind of a Buddha.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [Relationships between Two Objects in General](#) {2} {5}.]

Although the sutra-level causes for enlightenment are somewhat like their results, they are not so similar. For instance, a Buddha's physical body has thirty-two major features that are indicative of their causes. A Buddha's long tongue, for example, indicates and represents the type of love with which he or she, in previous lives as a bodhisattva, took care of others like a mother animal licking her young. Working with such causes alone requires three zillion (countless) eons to reach the goal.

### **General Tantra as the Resultant Vehicle**

In general tantra, the obtaining causes for attaining the enlightening body and mind of a Buddha are more analogous to the results we wish to attain. We practice now as if we had already achieved our goals. Because of this feature, tantra, as the "resultant vehicle," is more efficient for reaching enlightenment.

Tantra practice resembles a dress rehearsal. If we wish to dance in a ballet, we need to attend ballet school first and learn to dance. The obtaining cause, however, that functions as the natal source giving rise to the actual performance as its immediate successor, is the dress rehearsal of the ballet. Likewise, if we wish to practice tantra, we need to learn and develop first the essentials from sutra. Subsequent tantra practice is like the dress rehearsal to combine the

essentials to bring us to enlightenment as its immediate successor.

In all classes of tantra, then, we simulate four purified factors (*rnam-par dag-pa bzhi*) we will have as Buddhas. They are purified of all suffering and the causes of suffering, in the sense that they arise in our experience when we have achieved a true stopping ('*gog-bden*, true cessation) of both. The four are

1. purified bodies,
2. purified environments,
3. purified manners of experiencing sense objects with enjoyment (*longs-spyod*),
4. purified actions.

We do this by imagining that we have all four factors now. Using our imaginations (*dmigs-pa*) in these ways acts as a cause to achieve the four purified factors more quickly. Most translators call this process "visualization." The term, however, is a bit misleading, because the process is not merely visual. It involves the entire scope of our imaginations - imagining sights, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations, feelings, emotions, actions, and so on. Tantra harnesses the power of imagination - an extremely potent tool we all possess.

### **Purified Bodies**

In tantra, we imagine that we have purified bodies like those of one of the Buddha-figures - the many forms in which an enlightening body can appear. As the etymology of *yi-dam*, the Tibetan word for Buddha-figure, implies, we "bond our minds closely" with them in daily practice in order to reach enlightenment. Thus, we imagine our bodies are transparent, made of clear light, and able to multiply into countless replica bodies, all with the infinite energy and capabilities of those of a Buddha.

Moreover, we do not imagine ourselves as Buddha-figures merely during meditation sessions. We try to maintain mindfulness (*dran-pa*) on this the entire day. *Mindfulness* is a subsidiary awareness (*sems-byung*, mental factor) that accompanies cognition of something. Like a "mental glue," it prevents our attention from losing its object.

With mindfulness, we maintain both the clarity (*gsal-ba*) and self-esteem or dignity (*nga-rgyal*, pride) of the Buddha-figure. *Clarity* is the mental activity of producing the cognitive appearance of the Buddha-figure, regardless of level of clarity of detail or focus. *Self-esteem* is the mental activity of labeling "me" on the continuity of the appearance of the figure and feeling that this is who we actually are.

Tsongkhapa emphasized that maintaining mindfulness on the self-esteem of being the figure is more important at first than trying to gain clarity of detail and maintaining mindfulness on the detail. To begin, we need merely achieve a rough clarity of visualization, to serve as the basis for labeling (*gdags-gzhi*) "me."

### **Tantric Transformation of Self-Image**

While visualizing ourselves as Buddha-figures, we also imagine that we have the self-images associated with the figures. Many people have negative self-images, for instance as not being good enough or not deserving to be happy or loved. In contrast to such negative self-images, Buddha-figures imply positive ones.

In Buddhism, *negative* and *positive* do not denote bad and good. Rather, they imply destructive and constructive. *Destructive* means ripening into problems and suffering, in this life and future ones, through a process of leaving a legacy (*sa-bon*, seed, tendency) and habit (*bag-chags*, instinct) on our mental continuums. *Constructive* means ripening into happiness through a similar process.

Buddha-figure practice resembles, in a sense, a type of "mental judo" with which we work with the tendencies of our minds to project self-images. Instead of projecting negative ones, we project positive self-images instead. Each Buddha-figure has a positive self-image associated with it. For example, Avalokiteshvara represents being a warm, loving, and compassionate person; Manjushri ('*Jam-dpal dbyangs*), being someone clearheaded and able to understand everything. We practice with one or another figure in order to emphasize a specific positive self-image, in accordance with our dispositions and needs.

Moreover, each Buddha-figure represents not only a certain aspect of a fully enlightened being, but also the entirety of an enlightened state. Thus, practice of just one Buddha-figure is sufficient for reaching enlightenment. Most practitioners, however, work with a variety of Buddha-figure systems to gain the advantages of the special features of each.

The tantric method of transforming our self-images is not simply using "the power of positive thinking." The change of self-image derives from understanding the Buddha-nature factors and the voidness of ourselves, these factors, and all self-images we may have.

### The Voidness of Self-Images

From the point of view of our Buddha-natures, we all have the potentials for becoming Buddhas, as the self-images of the Buddha-figures represent. Moreover, negative and positive self-images are equally devoid of existing in impossible ways, as do we and our potentials. The impossible manner is with true existence (*bden-grub*, truly established existence).

According to the Prasangika-Madhyamaka theories, *true existence* means existence established by the power of something on the side of a phenomenon and not merely by mental labeling alone. Truly established existence is thus equivalent to existence established by self-nature (*rang-bzhin-gyis grub-pa*, inherent existence). This means that when valid cognition scrutinizes the superficial truth of something, it finds, on the side of the scrutinized phenomena, the referent "thing" (*btags-don*) corresponding to the name or label for the phenomenon. This is also equivalent to saying that phenomena have their existence established by individual defining characteristic marks (*rang-mtshan-gyis grub-pa*), which are findable on the side of the phenomena.

For example, we may feel that there is something inherently bad or good inside us that, by its own power, makes us exist as bad or good persons. We and any self-images we may have are equally devoid of existing in that manner, because there is no such thing as truly established existence - it is an impossible manner in which anything could exist.

Moreover, everything is devoid of all four extreme modes of impossible existence:

1. true existence - the eternalist position,
2. total nonexistence - the nihilist position,
3. both - from one point of view eternalist, from another nihilist,

4. neither - from one point of view, a manner of existence that is not eternalist; from another viewpoint, one that is not nihilist either.

If asked how self-images actually exist, all we can say, according to the uniquely Gelug-Prasangika view, is that, conventionally (*tha-snyad*), self-images do exist, but simply by virtue of mental labeling or imputation alone (*btags-pa 'dog-tsam-gyis grub-pa*). More fully, they exist as merely what the words and concepts for them refer to (*btags-chos*), based merely on a valid imputation of them on a valid basis for labeling (*gdags-gzhi*). There are no such things as Buddha-nature factors, or self-images representing them, findable inherently inside us that by their own powers, or in conjunction with our thinking about them, makes us good persons. Nevertheless, we may validly label them on our mental continuums based on our experience.

We may likewise validly label negative potentials and negative self-images based on the experiences of our mental continuums. Nevertheless, negative aspects derive from fleeting stains (*glo-bur-gyi dri-ma*) that temporarily obscure our Buddha-natures - such as confusion about how we, others, and everything around us exist. The fleeting stains are removable with accurate understanding of reality, specifically with nonconceptual cognition of voidness. On the other hand, the continuities of our Buddha-natures go on forever, with no beginning and no end. Therefore, positive self-images can permanently replace negative ones.

Buddha taught not to accept these points on the foundation of blind faith. Accurate understanding of reality, corroborated by valid inferential cognition (*rjes-dpag tshad-ma*) and valid straightforward cognition (*mngon-sum tshad-ma*), supports these truths and both dislodges and abolishes the confused belief that negative qualities are our true natures. Thus, a deep understanding of the four noble truths (four truths of life) - true problems, their true causes, their true stopping, and the true pathway minds that bring that about - is essential for a correct tantric transformation of self-image.

In the context of our discussion, we may formulate the four noble truths as:

1. uncontrollably recurring rebirth is the true problem;
2. belief in truly existent negative self-images, based on confusion about reality, is the true cause;
3. removal forever of this fleeting stain from our Buddha-natures is a true stopping;
4. nonconceptual cognition of voidness and of our Buddha-natures is the true pathway mind.

## Mantras

Each Buddha-figure also has one or more associated mantras. Mantras are sets of syllables and, often, additional Sanskrit words and phrases, all of which represent enlightening speech. While repeating the mantras of a Buddha-figure, we imagine we have the abilities to communicate perfectly to everyone the complete means for eliminating suffering and reaching enlightenment.

Mantras also shape our breath, and consequently our subtle energy-winds, enabling us to bring the winds under control for use in meditation practice. From a Western viewpoint, they have certain vibration frequencies that affect our energies and, consequently, our states of mind.

## Purified Environments - Mandalas

We also imagine that we have the purified environments of the Buddha-figures. Mandalas represent those environments. They are three-dimensional palaces, with the Buddha-figures in their centers and often many secondary figures around - some male, some female, some solitary, and some as couples. Two-dimensional depictions of mandalas, whether painted on cloth or made from colored powders, are like architectural blueprints for the palaces.

We imagine that we are not just the central figure, but all the Buddha-figures of the mandala. We also envision complete purified lands (*dag-zhing*) surrounding the palaces, where everything is conducive for reaching enlightenment through tantra practice.

## Purified Manner of Enjoyment

Moreover, we imagine that we are able to experience sense objects with enjoyment in the way that Buddhas do, untainted by any confusion (*zag-med-kyi bde-ba*, uncontaminated happiness). Normally, we experience things tainted with confusion. When we listen to music at home, for instance, we may be unable to enjoy it purely without fretting that our sound systems are not as good as those of our neighbors. We may be attached to good food and if we eat something delicious, we are greedy for more.

If we suffer from low self-esteem, we may feel that we do not deserve to be happy or that we are not worthy enough to receive affection or anything nice from others. Even if others give us something of good quality, we may feel that they lack sincere feelings and are only patronizing us. Alternatively, we may emotionally anesthetize ourselves so that unless the sense experience is extreme, we do not feel anything. In extreme cases, we may even feel that if we were to enjoy something nice, it might be taken from us - like a bone from a dog - and we might be punished.

If we are Buddhas, however, we are able to enjoy everything without such confusion. In tantra, then, with the high self-esteem and dignity of a Buddha-figure, we imagine that we are able to enjoy things purely. We do this, for example, when we receive the offerings we make to ourselves in the tantric rituals (*bdag-bskyed mchod-pa*) - a practice unique to the Gelug tradition.

All Tibetan traditions of tantra include, however, making offerings to the Buddhas and to all limited beings. When doing so, we imagine that we are able to bring them purified happiness, without us feeling any confusion about that. Often, when we give something to others, we feel that what we gave was inadequate and that they did not really enjoy it. Our negative attitudes reinforce our low self-esteem and, afterwards, we may even regret our gifts. In tantra, on the other hand, we imagine giving the best things possible and we feel that they bring purified pleasure to their recipients. This reinforces the positive self-image and high self-esteem of being a Buddha-figure, able to fulfill everybody's wishes for happiness. To counter stinginess, we imagine that we have an infinite supply of offerings that will never run out. After making offerings, we rejoice and feel happy about our giving, without any confusion or doubts.

Whether making offerings to the Buddhas, to all limited beings, or to ourselves, we need to understand the voidness of everything and everyone involved. In other words, we understand that the giver, the recipients, the objects enjoyed, the acts of enjoying them, and the happiness felt are devoid of existing in impossible ways. Thus, we do not inflate or "make a big deal" about our own or others' happiness. We do not experience it in dualistic manners; nor do we

cling to it. Such practice trains us to focus on voidness with a blissful awareness, without having the happiness that we experience be out of harmony with our understanding.

### Purified Actions

We also imagine that we are able to act as Buddhas do. Buddhas act by exerting an enlightening influence (' *phrin-las*, Buddha-activity) on others. This requires no conscious effort on their parts. By the very way Buddhas are, they spontaneously accomplish all aims (*lhun-grub*), in the sense that they inspire (*byin-rlabs*, bless) everyone receptive to their help. This works in a manner similar to charisma.

Buddhas exert four general types of enlightening influence:

1. calming and quieting others around them (*zhi*, pacification);
2. stimulating others to grow, to have clearer minds, warmer hearts, be more engaged in positive activities, and so on (*rgyas*, increase);
3. bringing others under their power to go in a positive direction and helping others to unify and gain power from their own internal forces, also to go in a positive direction (*dbang*, power);
4. stopping dangerous situations in which others may hurt themselves or be hurt by others (*drag-pa*, wrathful). The forceful (wrathful) Buddha-figures, surrounded by flames, represent this last type of enlightening influence.

While visualizing ourselves with the bodies of Buddha-figures, in the purified environments of mandala palaces, and repeating mantras, we imagine emitting rays of light and tiny figures, influencing others in the four ways. We do this while understanding the voidness of us, those we influence, our acts of influencing them, and the influence we exert. None of them exists in impossible ways. Thus, we counter the low self-esteem of feeling inadequate and powerless, while not inflating our egos.

### Mudras, Mantras, and Samadhis

Each Buddha-figure represents the body, speech, and mind of a Buddha and the inseparability of the three. Therefore, when visualizing ourselves performing actions as Buddha-figures, such as making offerings, we simultaneously do something physical, verbal, and mental with our ordinary bodies to integrate the three.

1. With our bodies, we make a specific mudra (*phyag-rgya*) for each action. A *mudra* is a hand-gesture, often with a complex arrangement of intertwined fingers.
2. With our speech, we recite aloud a specific mantra for each action. The mantra is usually a Sanskrit phrase or sentence, with special syllables added at the beginning and end, such as *om* for body, *ah* for speech, and *hum* for mind.
3. With our minds, we focus in a specific samadhi (*ting-nge-'dzin*) for each action. A *samadhi* is a state of total absorption, with full concentration on an object or on a state of mind. The action may entail samadhi
  - on a visualization, such as offering flowers,
  - on what the visualization represents, such as flowers represent offering our knowledge to benefit others, or
  - on an understanding, such as the inexhaustibility of the objects we offer or on their voidness.

## Validity of the Method

We may ask the question, "Isn't it a lie or distorted cognition (*log-shes*) to think we are Buddhas, when in truth we are not?" This is not self-deception, however, because all beings have the complete set of factors within that allow them to become Buddhas; in other words, everyone has Buddha-nature. We all have the same reality of mind, as well as the mental activity of simultaneously producing and perceiving cognitive appearances (*gsal-rig*, clarity and awareness). We all have a certain amount of positive force and deep awareness, which, if properly dedicated, will allow us to overcome limitations and realize our potentials to become Buddhas and be able to benefit others most effectively.

Therefore, as tantric practitioners, we think "I am a Buddha" only within the context of being fully aware that we are not yet enlightened. We do not pretentiously think that right now we omnisciently know the most skillful advice to give each being in the universe to help overcome his or her specific difficulty of the moment. Rather, we are labeling "me" as a Buddha on the future continuities of our mental continuums.

More fully, as properly qualified practitioners of tantra, we necessarily already have

- accurate understanding of (1) what is enlightenment, (2) what are the Buddha-nature factors allowing it, and (3) how these factors, enlightenment, and we exist;
- firm conviction that we have the complete factors of Buddha-nature within us now;
- firm conviction, based on accurate understanding of the four noble truths and voidness, that not only is enlightenment possible, but also that our own enlightenment is possible;
- accurate understanding of and firm conviction in the complete methods in tantra for achieving that enlightenment;
- unshakable bodhichitta motivation and resolve to benefit all beings as much as is possible and, to be able to do that, to achieve enlightenment through those methods;
- our Buddha-nature factors activated by having properly received a tantric empowerment from a qualified tantric master;
- a healthy relation with that tantric master, as a source of steady inspiration and reliable guidance to follow the tantra path correctly;
- firm resolve to keep as purely as possible the vows we have taken at the empowerment.

If we are missing any of these indispensable prerequisites, our tantric practice of imagining ourselves as Buddha-figures is not only distorted; it may also be psychologically and spiritually dangerous. If, however, we have the complete set of prerequisite states of mind, then based on the future continuities of our Buddha-nature factors developing into those of enlightened beings, we can validly label ourselves now as Buddhas. Thus, we are using mental labeling as a method to reach enlightenment, without fooling ourselves that we have already achieved it.

## Multiple Limbs and Faces

Some people find difficulty in relating to the multiple arms, faces, and legs that the various Buddha-figures have. These features, however, possess many levels of purpose, meaning, and symbolism.



If, for instance, we try to be aware of twenty-four things abstractly at the same time, we may find this achievement quite difficult. If, however, we imagine we have twenty-four arms, each of which represents one of the items, the graphic picture enables us to be more easily aware of the twenty-four simultaneously.

Moreover, since the arms, faces, and legs have many levels of symbolism, not just one, the process of imagining that we are multifaced, multilimbed Buddha-figures is like opening up the lenses of our minds. By helping us to be aware of many things simultaneously, it acts as a cause for developing the omniscient all-loving awareness (*rnam-mkhyen*) of a Buddha.

## (2) Closer Union of Method and Wisdom

### In Sutra

On the sutra level, method is conventional bodhichitta and wisdom is the discriminating awareness of voidness. These are the foundations for strengthening and expanding the enlightenment-building networks of positive force and deep awareness, the obtaining causes for achieving the body and mind of a Buddha.

Conventional bodhichitta focuses on our future enlightenment with two accompanying intentions ('*dun-pa*): to achieve that enlightenment and to benefit all beings by means of that. Discriminating awareness of voidness focuses on an absolute absence (*med-dgag*, nonimplicative negation) of true existence, with the understanding that there is no such manner of existence. Nothing has its existence and conventional identity established by the power of some defining characteristic marks inherently findable within it. Thus, in sutra, the main causes for a body and a mind of a Buddha have different ways of cognitively taking their objects ('*dzin-stangs*). On the most basic level, one is with the wish to attain something; the other is with the understanding that there are no such things as certain impossible modes of existence.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [Relationships with Objects](#) {3}.]

A moment of cognition cannot have two different manners of cognitively taking an object. Because of that, conventional bodhichitta and the discriminating awareness of voidness cannot occur simultaneously in one moment of cognition. We can only practice the two within the context of each other.

Practicing cognition "A" within the context of cognition "B" means to generate "B" during the moment immediately preceding "A." The momentum or legacy (*sa-bon*, seed) of "B" continues during "A," although "B" itself no longer occurs. In a sense, the momentum of "B" flavors "A," without "A" and "B" occurring simultaneously. This is the way sutra practice combines method and wisdom.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [The Union of Method and Wisdom in Sutra and Tantra: Gelug and Non-Gelug Presentations](#) {4} {6} {11}.]

### Buddha-Figures as Method in General Tantra

The enlightening body and mind of a Buddha share the same essential nature (*ngo-bo gcig*, one by nature), in the sense that they are two facts about the same phenomenon. As two facts about a Buddha, both are simultaneously the case in each moment of a Buddha's experience.

In a colloquial manner of speaking, they "come together in one package."

Moreover, a Buddha's mind and body are inseparable (*dbyer-med*) from each other. In other words, the two occur simultaneously in each moment, in the sense that if one is the case, so is the other. The body of a Buddha cannot be present without the mind of that Buddha, and vice versa.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [Relationships between Two Objects in General](#) {2} {5}.]

The most efficient means for achieving the simultaneous occurrence of an enlightening body and mind is to practice in one moment of cognition the causes for both. To accomplish this aim, tantra takes as method not only conventional bodhichitta, but also having the body of a Buddha-figure. To have such an enlightening body is the actual method, motivated by bodhichitta and dedicated to enlightenment, that will enable us to benefit all others. We cannot benefit everyone as fully as a Buddha does with our ordinary bodies, which are limited in innumerable ways.

Correspondingly, wisdom in tantra is the discriminating awareness of the voidness of ourselves in terms of being Buddha-figures, and not simply the voidness of ourselves in terms of the aggregate factors (Skt. *skandha*) that constitute our ordinary bodies and minds.

### **Voidness and the Basis for a Voidness**

Voidness is an absolute absence of true existence. It is the deepest truth about how something exists. As an unchanging fact about something, the voidness of something cannot exist independently by itself; it must always have a basis - that "something." In other words, the basis for a voidness (*stong-gzhi*) is the specific object that is devoid of existing in impossible ways.

Note that because each basis for a voidness is individual, the voidness of each basis is likewise individual. Associated with each basis, then, is an individual instance of a voidness. All voidnesses are equally voidnesses, but the voidness of one basis is not the voidness of another basis. This resembles the fact that all noses are equally noses, but my nose is not your nose.

Moreover, any basis for a voidness must also have aspects (*rnam-pa*), one of which a mind makes appearances of when it cognizes the basis. If the object is physical, for instance, the aspect may be its form, sound, smell, taste, or physical sensation. If the object is a way of being aware of something, for instance love, the appearance of it in a cognition may be the emotional feeling of it that arises.

### **Two Truths**

The appearance of the basis for a voidness and its actual voidness are two inseparable facts about the same object. They are called the two truths (*bden-gnyis*, two levels of truth) about an object. Both are true and are inseparably the case, regardless of whether one moment of mind perceives them simultaneously.

1. The superficial truth (*kun-rdzob bden-pa*, relative truth) about something is how it appears, namely

- what it appears to be,
- how it appears to exist.

2. The deepest truth (*don-dam bden-pa*, ultimate truth) about the same phenomenon is how it actually exists.

General tantra takes as method and wisdom the two truths about ourselves as Buddha-figures - the appearance of the Buddha-figure as a basis for voidness and its actual voidness.

### **Method and Wisdom in General Tantra Having One Manner of Cognitively Taking an Object**

Conceptual and nonconceptual cognitions of voidness entail two phases, both of which occur during a meditation session on voidness:

1. total absorption (*mnyam-bzhag*, meditative equipoise) cognition of voidness that is like space,
2. subsequent attainment (*rjes-thob*, post-meditation, subsequent realization) cognition of voidness that is like an illusion.

The focal object (*dmigs-yul*) during the total absorption phase is the deepest truth about something, its voidness. The superficial truths about it do not appear at that time. During the subsequent attainment phase, the focal object is the superficial truth about the object, while its deepest truth does not appear. The presence of an appearance of true existence and the absolute absence of true existence cannot appear simultaneously in one moment of cognition, whether conceptual or nonconceptual. They are mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the two truths remain inseparable.

The situation resembles sitting on the ground floor of a house and seeing through the window a person walk past. Although only the top half of the person appears to go by, this does not mean that the person is missing a bottom half. The limitation derives from the side of the perspective, not from the side of the person.

Thus, although the appearance of a Buddha-figure and its voidness, as method and wisdom, remain always inseparable, total absorption cognition of voidness focuses only on wisdom. Subsequent attainment cognition of voidness focuses only on method.

As in the case with bodhichitta, cognition of wisdom can only be held by the force of an immediately preceding moment of cognition of method, and vice versa. Wisdom and method are not simultaneous. Nevertheless, cognition of the appearance of a Buddha-figure as method still avoids the shortcoming of bodhichitta. This is because the manners with which wisdom and method cognitively take their objects during the total absorption and subsequent attainment phases are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are equivalent manners. Both are ways of cognitively taking voidness as an object.

More specifically, the manners with which wisdom and method cognitively take an object here are two facts about or ways of describing the same phenomenon - a manner of cognitively taking an object - that can be logically isolated from each other and conceptually specified as two different conceptually isolated items (*ngo-bo gcig ldog-pa tha-dad*). The two equivalent manners of cognitively taking an object are with the discriminating awareness that

1. there is no such thing as true existence;
2. the appearance of what resembles true existence does not correspond to anything real.

It is in this fashion, then, that general tantra practices method and wisdom with one manner of cognitively taking an object, and thus achieves a closer union of the two than sutra practice does.

### Summary

- All bases for voidness are inseparable from their voidness.
- Their appearance and voidness are two inseparable truths about them.
- Although focus on both can only alternate, still the manners of cognitively taking them during total absorption and subsequent attainment are not contradictory: they are equivalent to each other.

Although these points are valid for all phenomena; nevertheless, focusing on a table or on our ordinary bodies as bases for voidness cannot serve as a union of method and wisdom. We can only help others in the enlightening manner of a Buddha with the body of a Buddha-figure. Moreover, focusing on conventional bodhichitta and its voidness will also not serve as a union of method and wisdom, because the two still have contradictory manners of cognitively taking their objects.

Even if we are not yet able to focus on our appearances as Buddha-figures and on their voidness with one manner of cognitively taking an object, still we have bodies while we are focusing on their voidness. When tantra commentaries state that the mind understanding voidness appears as a Buddha-figure, this not only means that the mind cognizing voidness gives rise to an appearance of a Buddha-figure as the basis for that voidness, while maintaining an understanding of its voidness. It also means, on a simpler level, that the body of the person focusing on voidness appears as a Buddha-figure, whether or not the person cognizes it at that moment.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [The Union of Method and Wisdom in Sutra and Tantra: Gelug and Non-Gelug Presentations](#) {4} {6} {11}.]

### (3) Special Basis for Voidness

The next reason why tantra is faster than sutra is that the basis for voidness it uses is special. It takes, as the basis for voidness meditation, the appearance of the body of a Buddha-figure. Such a basis is special from three points of view.

Compared to most other objects, the appearances of Buddha-figures are:

- less deceptive,
- more stable,
- more subtle.

#### Buddha-Figures as Less Deceptive

In sutra, we focus on the voidness of a phenomenon or of a person. When we think of the basis for that voidness, for instance, our ordinary bodies, the appearances of the bases that arise in our cognitions - both conceptual and nonconceptual - are produced by minds that are

affected by causes for deceptive (' *khrol-s nang*) or discordant appearance-making (*gnyis-s nang*, dual appearances). In other words, our usual minds make our bodies appear to us as existing in deceptive manners discordant with their deepest truth. For instance, our minds make them appear truly and inherently to exist as fat, ugly, and unlovable. Because of believing that this deceptive manner of existence corresponds to reality, we may feel alienation from our bodies and self-hatred toward them.

In voidness meditation, we think how our bodies do not actually exist in the impossible manners in which they appear to us to exist. It may be an accurate superficial truth that presently we are fat and ugly by the conventional standards of our societies and that no one loves us by our personal conventions of what love means. Nevertheless, we do not truly and inherently exist in those ways, forever, regardless of circumstances and points of view. That is impossible.

While focusing on the voidness of our ordinary bodies - the absolute absence of their existing in impossible manners - disturbing emotions and attitudes (*nyon-mongs*, Skt. *klesha*, afflictive emotions) cannot affect our minds. Nevertheless, the bases for that voidness, our ordinary bodies, are objects that our minds made appear in deceptive ways before our total absorption on their voidness. Because of that, our previous experiences of deceptive appearance-making and disturbing emotions can, in a sense, infect or destabilize our understandings of that voidness. The mechanism is similar to that by which focus on voidness can be within the context of the legacies of previous moments of bodhichitta.

In tantra, on the other hand, we first dissolve all ordinary appearances. We halt our minds' deceptive appearance-making by starting with the understanding of voidness. Then, within that state of an absolute absence, we imagine that we arise in the forms of Buddha-figures and focus on the voidness of those forms. Thus, the situation differs significantly from meditating on the voidness of our ordinary bodies. In tantra, we already understand voidness and then within the context of voidness, we focus on the bodies of Buddha-figures - things that we have already understood are devoid of true existence. In this way, the appearances of ourselves as Buddha-figures are not as deceptive as the forms of our ordinary bodies would be.

In short, normally when we think of the forms of our ordinary bodies, we emotionally overreact to them as "me" in terms of disturbing feelings and judgments, such as "My body is ugly, I don't like it," or "How beautiful I am." Such disturbing feelings can undermine our understandings of their voidness. Focusing on the voidness of the purified forms of Buddha-figure bodies avoids this danger and disadvantage.

### **Buddha-Figures as More Stable**

When we focus on the voidness of our ordinary bodies in bodhisattva sutra, the bases for that voidness are capricious (fleeting) objects. They are bodies that sometimes feel good, sometimes hurt, and so on. Subject to the unpredictable impulses of karma, they are unstable and noticeably change each time we meditate. They even change during the course of one session - for instance, as our knees begin to ache.

In contrast, each time we try to focus on the voidness of the body of a Buddha-figure, its appearance as the basis for that voidness does not grossly change. The body that appears can perform functions such as helping others - even if only in our imaginations - and in this sense is a nonstatic (impermanent) phenomenon. However, it is a so-called "static" nonstatic phenomenon (*r tag-pa shes-bya-ba'i mi-r tag-pa*), in the sense that it does not grow old, does

not become tired, does not fall ill, and so on. It always remains in the same condition whenever we focus on it in meditation. Thus, Buddha-figures serve as more stable objects than our capricious bodies do for gaining and enhancing the understanding of voidness and for maintaining single-minded concentration on that voidness.

### **Buddha-Figures as More Subtle**

Our ordinary bodies as bases for voidness are gross forms that appear to our eye consciousness. Because they are gross, they appear to us as concrete and solid objects, existing independently of a relationship with the mind. That relationship is as what the mental labels or concepts for them refer to. The truth that they are devoid of existing in such impossible manners is not so obvious.

In general tantra, however, the bodies of the Buddha-figures on which we focus are subtle forms that we see only in our minds' eyes. Because of their subtlety, it is more obvious that they lack existence independent of what a mind can impute. Thus, it is easier to understand their voidness.

### **(4) Special Level of Mental Activity**

Anuttarayoga tantra analyzes three levels of mental activity (mind): gross, subtle, and subtlest.

1. The gross level involves the five types of sense consciousness - namely eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body consciousness. It is always nonconceptual.
2. The subtle level concerns mind consciousness, both conceptual and nonconceptual.
3. The subtlest level of mind is called "clear light" (' *od-gsal*). It is like a laser beam of mental activity. It refers to the basic activity of merely producing and perceiving cognitive appearances, simultaneously, which provides continuity of experience from moment to moment and from one lifetime to the next, even into enlightenment. Clear-light mental activity is exclusively nonconceptual. Only the methods of anuttarayoga bring access to this level of mind.

In sutra and the three lower classes of tantra, nonconceptual cognition of voidness is by valid yogic cognition (*rnal-'byor mngon-sum*), which is on the second of the three levels of mental activity, the subtle one. Unlike our usual mental cognition, which arises from the dominating condition (*bdag-rkyen*) of our mental sensors (*gid-kyi dbang-po*), yogic cognition arises from a state of combined shamatha (*zhi-gnas*; calm abiding, mental quiescence) and vipashyana (*lhag-mthong*, special insight) as its dominating condition. *Shamatha* is a serenely stilled and settled state of mind, while *vipashyana* is an exceptionally perceptive state.

Because conceptual cognition is exclusively with the subtle level of mental activity and clear light cognition is exclusively nonconceptual,

- conceptual cognition of voidness is exclusively with the subtle level of mind;
- nonconceptual cognition of voidness may be with either the subtle or the subtlest level of mind.

Therefore, tantra practice in general includes, in its highest class, using a special level of mental activity for nonconceptually cognizing voidness - clear-light mind - although not all classes of tantra use this level.

## Concluding Points Concerning Voidness in Sutra and Tantra

Subtle and subtlest mental activity nonconceptually cognize the same voidness, namely voidness as an absolute absence of true existence. Gelug is unique in asserting that conceptual and nonconceptual cognition of voidness also cognize this same voidness. Because of this, both stages of practice in each of the four tantra classes - the yoga with signs (*mtshan-bcas-kyi rnal-'byor*) and the yoga without signs (*mtshan-med-kyi rnal-'byor*) in the first three classes, and the generation stage (*b skyed-rim*, development stage) and complete stage (*rdzogs-rim*, completion stage) in anuttarayoga - have the same understanding of voidness.

## 7 Non-Gelug Variations Concerning General Tantra

Except for the following variations in assertions, the non-Gelug traditions of Tibetan Buddhism - Sakya, Kagyu, and Nyingma - agree with Gelug on the various reasons why general tantra is more efficient than sutra.

### (1) Closer Analogies

#### Buddha-Nature and Positive Self-Images

The non-Gelug traditions agree with Gelug that transforming our self-images to those of Buddha-figures is not simply by the power of positive thinking. It derives from our Buddha-natures and on the fact that self-images are devoid of existing in impossible manners.

Most Sakya masters explain, as in Gelug, that our Buddha-natures contain all the potentials (*nus-pa*) for becoming enlightened. When Nyingma masters explain, on the other hand, that the factors of Buddha-nature are not merely potentials, but are complete within us (*rdzogs-pa*), they do not mean that we are already fully operational, omniscient, all-loving Buddhas. The Buddha-nature factors, such as the natures of our minds and their innate qualities of compassion and so on, are complete in the sense that we do not need to import or manufacture them. Nevertheless, fleeting stains prevent our access and realization of them in their fullest forms. Representing these factors by the self-images of Buddha-figures helps us to remove the mental obscurations (*sgrib-pa*, obstacles) that constitute these stains.

Moreover, all non-Gelug schools agree that a tantric transformation of self-image requires understanding that self-images are devoid of existing as phenomena whose manner of existence actually corresponds to the way that conceptual cognition of them makes them appear. On the most basic level, conceptual cognition makes self-images appear to exist with true existence. The non-Gelug traditions take true existence to mean *true unimputed existence*. This means existing by themselves, as phenomena arising unimputedly, separately from minds that cognitively give rise to and perceive them. In technical terms, as imputations, self-images refer to something (*btags-chos*), but what they refer to does not correspond to the unimputedly existent objects that the imputations conceptually imply (*zhen-yul*).

For example, the self-image of being an idiot refers to an idiot, as defined by social or personal convention. This is what it means. Nevertheless, there is no such thing as an absolute idiot - someone who is an idiot regardless of who is regarding him or her in that way. Thus, despite regarding ourselves as idiots, our self-images do not make us into absolute idiots, although our self-images have meaning. The same is true when we adopt the self-image of being Buddha-figures.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [Introductory Survey of Objects of Cognition: Gelug Presentation](#) {7}.]

## Sakya View of Inseparable Samsara and Nirvana

The Sakya tradition provides a further explanation of why imagining ourselves as Buddha-figures is not distorted cognition. According to the Sakya view of inseparable samsara and nirvana (' *khor-'das dbyer-med*), our energies vibrate and appear in multiple forms simultaneously, somewhat like subatomic particles vibrating simultaneously at multiple quantum levels. On one quantum level, we appear in the forms of our usual bodies; but on other levels, we simultaneously appear as Buddha-figures. The appearances that we or anyone else perceives of us depend on the minds that perceive them. So long as the minds that perceive them are not affected by superficial or deepest causes for deceptive or distorted appearance-making - such as astigmatism, autism, or grasping for true unimputed existence - the cognitions of the appearances of us as usual humans or as Buddha-figures are equally valid.

## (2) Closer Union of Method and Wisdom

As with the Gelug presentation, method in non-Gelug general tantra is the appearances of ourselves as Buddha-figures and wisdom is the cognition of voidness with respect to those appearances. Many masters of the non-Gelug traditions, however, differentiate self-voidness (*rang-stong*) from other-voidness (*gzhan-stong*). Depending on how they define each and whether they accept as the ultimate view one, the other, or both, their assertions of the wisdom that is inseparable from method in tantra varies.

In general, *self-voidness* is an absence of a self-nature (*rang-bzhin*), referring to an absence of an impossible mode of existence. *Other-voidness* is a deep awareness (*ye-shes*) with an absence of, or devoid of other levels of mental activity. All agree that the voidness asserted by Gelug is a variety of self-voidness and that, although it has a certain level of validity, it is not the ultimate view.

## In Terms of Self-Voidness

When voidness refers to self-voidness, the appearances and their self-voidness, as their mode of existence, are still two inseparable facts about the same phenomenon. Nevertheless, because many basic assertions here are different from those in Gelug, the explanations of the closer union of method and wisdom also vary.

According to Madhyamaka in general, there are two types of ultimate phenomena:

- Denumerable ultimate phenomena (*rnam-grangs-pa'i don-dam*) are voidnesses that are validly cognized conceptually. They are "denumerable" in the sense that they can be counted among what appears to minds validly cognizing phenomena through mentally labeling them with words and concepts.
- Nondenumerable ultimate phenomena (*rnam-grangs ma-yin-pa'i don-dam*) are voidnesses that are validly cognized nonconceptually. They are "nondenumerable" in the sense that they cannot be counted among what appears to minds validly cognizing phenomena through mentally labeling them with words and concepts.



For ease of discussion, let us coin the terms *denumerable voidness* and *nondenumerable voidness* for these two.

*Denumerable voidness* is voidness as the nonimplicative negation (*med-dgag*, affirming negation) of true unimputed existence. In simpler terms, it is the absolute absence of true unimputed existence, because there is no such thing. Negation phenomena (*dgag-pa*), such as denumerable voidness are merely conceptual categories (*spyi*, universals), and, as such, can only be known conceptually.

*Nondenumerable voidness* is a voidness that does not fit into the solid categories implied by conceptualizations such as affirmations (*sgrub-pa*), negations, both, or neither. In this sense, such a voidness is "beyond all words and concepts." Moreover, nondenumerable voidness is not merely a voidness that is beyond words and concepts. It is an inseparable voidness and appearance, both of which are beyond words and concepts.

All non-Gelug traditions accept that the ultimate (*mthar-thug*) manner in which everything exists is nondenumerable voidness. All things exist in a manner beyond words and concepts. The words and concepts for manners of existence - such as "with an affirmation of true existence," "with a negation of true existence," "with both," or "with neither" - conceptually imply (*zhen-pa*) that these manners actually exist as concrete categories, like separate boxes. This is impossible. They also conceptually imply that if the ultimate manner in which everything exists could be put into words and concepts, this manner of existence would be a concrete item that would fit into one of these solid boxes. This too is impossible. Valid nonconceptual cognition reveals that the ultimate manner of existence of everything does not fit into any conceptual box. Thus, the ultimate way in which everything exists is beyond a manner corresponding to what the words and concepts for them conceptually imply.

[See: [Affirmations, Negations, and Denumerable and Nondenumerable Ultimate Phenomena {8}](#).]

### Two Non-Gelug Usages of the Term "Self-Voidness"

Among the non-Gelug schools, the usages of the term *self-voidness* regarding the two levels of deepest truth in the context of tantra fall into two camps.

1. Nyingma and mainstream Sakya, for example the fifteenth-century master Gorampa (*Go-ram bSod-nams seng-ge*), tend to use "self-voidness" to mean only the ultimate manner of existence, nondenumerable voidness. They do not usually use the term to refer to the denumerable voidness of anything, its absolute absence of existing with true existence.
2. Karma and Shangpa Kagyu, in their presentations of tantra, use "self-voidness" exclusively for denumerable voidness. Although they accept that the manner of existence of everything is ultimately beyond words and concepts, they do not use the term *self-voidness* for this nondenumerable voidness. Note that here, we are limited ourselves to the Karma Kagyu and Shangpa Kagyu assertions of the Maha-Madhyamaka tradition, as its Madhyamaka view is the view of reality that pertains to the practice of tantra.

## Relevant Assertions Unique to Non-Gelug

The non-Gelug traditions differ significantly from Gelug on five further points that are relevant for understanding their explanations of why method and wisdom are closer in general tantra than they are in sutra. Sakya, Kagyu, and Nyingma assert in common:

1. Nondenumerable voidness, as a voidness beyond words and concepts, is beyond the four extreme modes of impossible existence that are the conceptually implied objects corresponding to the conceptualizations: (a) true existence, (b) an absolute absence of true existence, (c) both, or (d) neither. As with Gelug, an absolute absence of true existence, as a denumerable voidness, is an absolute absence of the four extremes of (a) eternalism (true existence), (b) nihilism (total nonexistence), (c) both, and (d) neither.
2. Conceptual cognition, and only conceptual cognition, makes its object appear to exist in one of the four impossible manners that denumerable voidness is beyond. Nonconceptual cognition does not make its object appear in any of these ways.
3. Denumerable voidness, as an absolute absence, can therefore be an object only of conceptual cognition, not of nonconceptual cognition.
4. Nondenumerable voidness, as a mode of existence beyond words and concepts, can be an object only of nonconceptual cognition, not of conceptual cognition.
5. "Wisdom" as discriminating awareness (*shes-rab*) of voidness cognizes only denumerable voidness. The "wisdom" of nondenumerable voidness is exclusively deep awareness (*ye-shes*).

## Conceptual and Nonconceptual Unions of Method and Wisdom in Terms of Self-Voidness

In the Gelug tradition, the union of method and wisdom in general tantra entails the same method and wisdom whether the union is with conceptual or nonconceptual cognition. Moreover, the manner for combining the practice of method and wisdom is also the same on both levels. With sufficient strengthening of the enlightenment-building networks of positive force and deep awareness, a conceptual union leads to a nonconceptual one.

The non-Gelug traditions agree that a conceptual union of method and wisdom is prerequisite for achieving a nonconceptual one and that strengthening the two enlightenment-building networks brings the transition from one to the other. However, the wisdom factor differs in the conceptual and nonconceptual unions. On the conceptual level, wisdom is the discriminating awareness of denumerable voidness; on the nonconceptual level, it is the deep awareness of nondenumerable voidness. Consequently, the manner in which non-Gelug combines method and wisdom here is also different on the two levels.

Non-Gelug explains the union of method and wisdom in conceptual cognition in the same basic manner as Gelug does. Method and wisdom are each cognitively taken only within the context of the other, which means that each continues as a legacy when the other occurs. As in Gelug, such practice avoids the shortcomings of bodhichitta as method, since the manners of cognitively taking space-like and illusion-like denumerable voidness are not contradictory. They are equivalent.

In Gelug sutra and general tantra, the appearances of Buddha-figures that arise in conceptual and nonconceptual subsequent attainment cognition of voidness are the same. Both are appearances of what seem to be truly existent Buddha-figures. In non-Gelug, appearance-making of true existence (*bden-srang*) occurs only with conceptual cognition. In both the non-Gelug and Gelug systems, such appearances are *unpurified appearances* (*ma-dag-pa'i srang-ba*, impure appearances). The appearance-making factors (*gsal-cha*, clarity factor) of our mental continuums are not purified of the obscurations that cause production of such deceptive appearances.

According to non-Gelug, yogic nonconceptual cognition produces purified appearances (*dag-pa'i srang-ba*, pure appearances) - appearances produced by mental continuums temporarily purified of the obscurations giving rise to unpurified appearances.

*Purified appearances* are appearances that are beyond words and concepts. In other words, the manner of existence that yogic nonconceptual cognition produces an appearance of is a manner that is beyond the extremes of a presence or absence of true existence, both, or neither. This is because deep awareness of nondenumerable voidness accompanies yogic nonconceptual cognition. We understand nonconceptually the purified manner of existence that appears.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [Divisions, Causes, and Elimination of Unpurified Appearance-Making According to Non-Gelug](#) {9} {13} {17}.]

Thus, yogic nonconceptual cognition of the nondenumerable voidness of a Buddha-figure gives rise to the purified appearance of the Buddha-figure simultaneously with the deep awareness of how it exists. In this manner, yogic nonconceptual cognition here combines method and wisdom in the same moment of cognition.

During total absorption cognition, however, nondenumerable self-voidness is more prominent; while during subsequent attainment cognition, the appearance of the Buddha-figure is more prominent. Equal prominence of both occurs only in a Buddha's omniscient awareness. Nevertheless, total absorption and subsequent attainment here have only one manner of cognitively taking their objects - namely, as that which is beyond all words and concepts.

### **In Terms of Other-Voidness**

Some non-Gelug masters assert that the voidness that is beyond words and concepts is also a cognitive state. They call this "other-voidness" (*gzhan-stong*), because it is a cognitive state devoid of other levels of mind, namely the levels of mind at which conceptual cognition occurs.

There are two main traditions.

1. When non-Gelug masters use *self-voidness* to refer to the ontological state beyond words and concepts, as for instance in Nyingma, they accept other-voidness in addition to self-voidness.
2. When they use *self-voidness* exclusively in the sense of an absolute absence, as for instance in Karma and Shangpa Kagyu, they assert other-voidness as also being beyond self-voidness. Implicit, however, is that other-voidness still exists in a manner that is beyond words and concepts.

Inseparable from and simultaneous with other-voidness are the pure appearances of Buddha-figures. These pure appearances are the "play" (*rol-pa*) or "effulgence" (*rtsal*) of other-voidness, in the sense that the cognitive state of other-voidness spontaneously gives rise to them. Other-voidness is naturally pure of unpurified appearance-making. The obscurations that cause deceptive appearance-making are fleeting and only temporarily prevent other-voidness from its natural pure appearance-making. Purification of these obscurations does not create the production of pure appearances. The purification process is not like building a machine. Because of this manner of presentation, it is more accurate to speak of *pure appearances* rather than *purified appearances* in the context of other-voidness.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [Alaya and Impure Appearance-Making](#) {10} {18}.]

Concordant with the non-Gelug assertion of nondenumerable self-voidness as the manner of existence beyond words and concepts, the nonconceptual cognition of other-voidness directly and simultaneously cognizes inseparable other-voidness and pure appearances. During total absorption, the former is prominent; while during subsequent attainment, the latter is prominent. The cognition has only one way of taking its object - as the cognitive state beyond all words and concepts.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [The Union of Method and Wisdom in Sutra and Tantra: Gelug and Non-Gelug Presentations](#) {4} {6} {11}.]

### **(3) Special Basis for Voidness**

#### **Buddha-Figures as Less Deceptive**

Gelug is unique in asserting that conceptual and nonconceptual cognition both give rise to appearances of true existence (*bden-srang*), except when nonconceptually cognizing voidness: an absolute absence of true existence. The non-Gelug traditions assert that only conceptual cognition gives rise to appearances of true existence. These may be appearances of any of the four extremes of eternalism, nihilism, both, or neither.

Sensory and mental nonconceptual cognitions do not fabricate and project (*spros-pa*) an appearance of its object as truly existent in any of these ways. It produces an appearance of its object as not truly existent (*med-srang*). Such an appearance, however, is still an unpurified one.

Except during yogic nonconceptual cognition of nondenumerable voidness when the process of ridding ourselves forever (*spang-ba*, abandoning) unawareness begins, unawareness (*ma-rig-pa*, ignorance) accompanies all moments of conceptual and nonconceptual cognition. Unawareness may be of cause and effect or of the manner in which something exists. Let us speak here only of the latter.

In general, unawareness is a way of cognitively relating (*shes-pa*) to a cognitive object (*yul*). It is of two varieties. While focusing on and cognizing an object,

1. it may simply not know how it exists (*mi-shes-pa*), or
2. it may, in addition, simultaneously take it to exist in a manner contradictory to deepest truth (*phyin-ci log-tu 'dzin-pa*).

Sensory nonconceptual cognition occurs for only one-sixtieth of a second. In the case of visual cognition, it perceives only shapes and colors. The shapes and colors it cognizes exist as not truly "this"s or "that"s. The unawareness of not knowing how they exist accompany the nonconceptual cognition of them.

Conceptual cognition immediately follows, fabricating and projecting appearances of the shapes and colors as objects with truly existent identities as "this"s or "that"s , for instance as our ordinary bodies. It simultaneously takes them in a contradictory manner, as actually being truly existent objects with truly existent identities.

Because nonconceptual sensory cognition occurs so quickly, we are normally unaware of it. Our usual cognition of our ordinary bodies, then, is conceptual, despite our misbelief that we are actually "seeing" what our conceptual minds make appear. Thus, cognition of our ordinary bodies usually entails disturbing emotions and attitudes toward them, which can infect our focus on their voidness. Even if we are able to maintain nonconceptual sensory cognition, we remain unaware of how what we perceive actually exists.

Focus on the voidness of our appearances as Buddha-figures, already generated with an understanding of their voidness, minimizes the danger of infection from disturbing emotions and attitudes or from unawareness. Therefore, it is less deceptive. This is the case whether our cognition of their voidness is conceptual or nonconceptual.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [Fine Analysis of Objects of Cognition: Non-Gelug Presentation](#) {12}. See also: [Divisions, Causes, and Elimination of Unpurified Appearances According to Non-Gelug](#) {9} {13} {17}.]

### **Buddha-Figures as More Stable**

The non-Gelug systems do not use the Gelug term *so-called static nonstatic phenomena*. Instead, they often use *unaffected phenomena* (' *dus ma-byas*, unconditioned) or *everlasting phenomena* (*rtag-pa*, permanent) with the same meaning. The appearances of Buddha-figures are more stable objects for focus in voidness meditation than the appearances of our ordinary bodies are, because they are unaffected by aging, hunger, or aches and pains and because they last forever.

### **Buddha-Figures as More Subtle**

When we see our ordinary bodies, we focus on the shapes and colors that our nonconceptual sensory cognition gives rise to. Almost immediately, however, we cognize the shapes and colors through the filter of an appearance of a truly existent body that our conceptual cognition fabricates and superimposes on them. Although what we perceive is conceptual, we believe that we are actually "seeing" what appears to us.

Because we generate the unpurified appearances of ourselves as Buddha-figures from our conceptual minds, we know more easily that they lack the true existence with which they appear to us.

Further, because purified appearances of ourselves as Buddha-figures arise simultaneously with cognition of their voidness that is beyond words and concepts, they never appear to exist with true existence. Moreover, they never appear to exist separately from either their voidness or the mind that gives rise to them. Although the same is true regarding the purified

appearances of ourselves in our ordinary human forms, such forms do not become the physical bodies of a Buddha once we remove all fleeting stains or obscurations.

#### **(4) Special Level of Mental Activity**

The Sakya and Kagyu traditions assert the same basic scheme of three levels of mental activity as Gelug does. Nyingma, on the other hand, differentiates two levels of mental activity:

1. limited awareness (*sems*, "sem"),
2. pure awareness (*rig-pa*, "rigpa").

Limited awareness includes the first two general anuttarayoga categories. Thus, not only are sensory and ordinary mental cognitions limited awareness, but so are yogic nonconceptual cognitions. Rigpa, on the other hand, in its various facets, encompasses the clear-light level. Let us keep to the classification scheme of general anuttarayoga and use merely the term *clear-light mind* for the subtlest level of mental activity.

The non-Gelug traditions agree with Gelug that only anuttarayoga tantra uses the subtlest level of mental activity, clear-light mind, for cognizing voidness. Bodhisattva sutra and the three lower tantra classes employ yogic nonconceptual cognition, a type of subtle mental activity, not subtlest. Thus, tantra includes a special level of mental activity for cognizing voidness, but not all classes of tantra employ it.

#### **Concluding Points Concerning Voidness in Sutra and Tantra**

The non-Gelug traditions differentiate the two stages of each of the four classes of tantra in terms of whether the practice is without or with cognition of voidness. The first stage of each lacks the cognition, while the second has it.

The meaning here is that with the first stage of each, practitioners have only cognition of denumerable voidness. With the second stage, they gain cognition of nondenumerable voidness as an ontological state (self-voidness), a cognitive state (other-voidness), or both. This is because the first stage has only conceptual cognition of voidness, while the second brings nonconceptual cognition of it.

Even if we conceptually understand nondenumerable voidness beyond words and concepts, we can only focus on it at the first stage of practice through a conceptual category representing it, which cannot be an accurate idea at all. In most cases, it would be, in fact, a mental representation of an absence of words and concepts.

### **8 Gelug Presentation of Anuttarayoga in General**

All the details of the four points for analyzing the increased efficiency of general tantra pertain to anuttarayoga. Beyond that, however, the same four points may help us to understand why the highest class of tantra, anuttarayoga, is even speedier than the other three tantra classes are.

## (1) Closer Analogies

Anuttarayoga practice not only entails analogies upward with the results we are trying to achieve, as is the case in general tantra. The practices that simulate the results are also analogous downward with the bases we want to purify (*sbyang-gzhi*), namely our samsaric existence.

### Downward Analogies

Samsaric existence entails the uncontrollably recurring experience of death, bardo (the in-between state), and rebirth. We can describe the process by which the three happen as changes of subtlety of mental activity.

1. As we die, our consciousness becomes progressively more subtle, passing from its gross to its subtlest level in eight steps. This is because the physical bases for the grosser levels fail (*thim*, dissolve), in the sense that they can no longer function as supports for mental activity. At death, only clear-light laser-beam mental activity is left.
2. In bardo, mental activity becomes slightly grosser as we experience it giving rise to the subtle appearances that occur during the state between births.
3. With rebirth, mental activity becomes gross once more, back to its ordinary levels, with sense consciousness and its production of gross appearances.

The Gelug tradition focuses on purifying our future deaths, the ensuing bardos, and our next rebirths. For Gelug, *purifying*, here, means to eliminate our samsaric existence such that it never recurs - in other words, to achieve a true stopping (true cessation) of it.

A similar process of change in subtlety occurs when we fall asleep.

1. With deep sleep, we reach an extremely subtle level of mental activity.
2. When dreaming, the level of mental activity is slightly grosser, producing subtle appearances.
3. When we awaken, our mental activity returns to the gross sensory level.

### Upward Analogies

Although we attain the three inseparable enlightening corpuses of a Buddha (*sku-gsum*, three Buddha-bodies) simultaneously with the achievement of enlightenment, we may conceive of the process as involving three steps that parallel what happens with death or sleep. The three steps are mental activity becoming the subtlest, then slightly grosser, and then more gross.

1. The subtlest level is *dharmakaya* (*chos-sku*, the corpus of a Buddha that encompasses everything), referring to a Buddha's omniscient mental activity and the nature of that activity.
2. Slightly grosser is *dharmakaya*'s giving rise to the appearances of a *sambhogakaya* (*longs-sku*, a corpus of full use) - a network of subtle forms that make full use of the bodhisattva teachings and which only *arya bodhisattvas* can perceive. *Arya bodhisattvas* are bodhisattvas who have experienced nonconceptual cognition of voidness.
3. Even grosser is *dharmakaya*'s giving rise to the appearances of a *nirmanakaya* (*sprul-sku*, a corpus of emanations) - a network of grosser forms, emanated from

sambhogakaya, which some ordinary persons can see as well.

Alternatively, and especially in general anuttarayoga tantra, sambhogakaya is the network of enlightening speech of a Buddha and nirmanakaya is the network of all manifest forms of a Buddha's enlightening body, regardless of level of subtlety. A Buddha's speech and physical bodies are each progressively grosser than a Buddha's enlightening mind. Taken together, nirmanakaya and sambhogakaya constitute a *rupakaya*, a corpus of enlightening forms (*gzugs-sku*, form body).

## The Analogous Practices

The anuttarayoga practices for achieving the mind and form bodies of a Buddha are analogous to the three-step process of both the basis and the resultant levels.

1. When we die or fall asleep on the basis level, or when we achieve a dharmakaya on the resultant level, we get down to the subtlest level of mental activity, in eight steps. Similarly, on the anuttarayoga path, to gain nonconceptual cognition of voidness as the cause for a Buddha's enlightening mind, we also go down, in eight steps, to the subtlest level of mind, and access and harness it for this cognition.

First, we do this in our imaginations on the generation stage. When our attainments of all the necessary meditation tools are complete through extensive practice in our imaginations, we reach our clear-light minds in actuality as we advance through the steps of the complete stage.

Note that *clear-light mind*, as a term for clear-light mental activity, does not mean that all beings share one clear-light mind. Just as the voidness of each phenomenon is an individual voidness, likewise clear-light mind, as a level of mental activity, is individual in each being.

2. When we achieve a bardo or dream state on a basis level, or a sambhogakaya on the resultant level, our mental activity becomes slightly grosser. Likewise, within the state of understanding voidness, we arise on the path in a subtle form, such as a creative energy-drop (*thig-le*, Skt. *bindu*), a seed-syllable (*sa-bon*), or a simplified Buddha-figure.
3. When we take rebirth or wake up on a basis level, or manifest a nirmanakaya on a resultant one, our mental activity produces gross appearances that normal eye consciousness can perceive. Similarly, on the path, we make the subtle form of a creative energy-drop, and so on, appear in a grosser aspect as the full body of a Buddha-figure.

We may understand the purification process by an analogy. Suppose there are two two-story houses sharing one basement in which is located the common source of electricity for both houses. One house is the basis situation of samsara; the other is the resultant situation of enlightenment. The ground story of each house is the level of subtle appearances; the top story is the level of grosser appearances. The common basement is the level of clear-light mental activity.

Suppose that the electricity is flowing only to the samsara house, not to the enlightenment house. To disconnect the electricity from the samsara house and connect it to the enlightenment house, we need to go down an eight-step staircase to the basement and change the connection. Likewise, to purify samsara, in the sense of causing it never to recur, we need



to go down to the clear-light level in eight steps and disconnect the appearance-making mechanism from giving rise to the appearances of samsara. We do this with nonconceptual cognition of voidness. In doing so, we automatically connect the appearance-making mechanism to the enlightenment house so that it produces the subtle and gross appearances of the physical corpses of a Buddha.

Before we are able actually to reach the basement and reconnect the wires, we need to practice the entire procedure, in the sense of rehearsing it. In other words, we practice doing something that resembles the procedure - first in our imaginations and then in actual simulations. This is what it means to practice a path that is analogous to both the basis we wish to purify and the result we wish to attain. Rehearsing in our imaginations corresponds to generation stage practice; rehearsing with actual simulations corresponds to complete stage practice.

Thus, in anuttarayoga, there are not only more analogies than general tantra contains, both upward with the result and downward with the basis, but also closer analogies. Moreover, the practice mimics not only the phenomena we experience on both resultant and basis levels, but also with how we gain their experience in both. These practices are therefore called "taking pathway minds for (attaining) the three corpses of a Buddha" (sku-gsum lam-'khyer):

1. taking death as a pathway mind for (attaining) a Dharmakaya ('chi-ba chos-sku lam-'khyer),
2. taking bardo as a pathway mind for (attaining) a Sambhogakaya (bar-do longs-sku lam-'khyer),
3. taking birth as a pathway mind for (attaining) a Nirmanakaya (skye-ba sprul-sku lam-'khyer).

## (2) Closer Union of Method and Wisdom

### Method in Terms of the Appearance of a Body

Just as there are three levels of mental activity, there are also three levels of body that support them:

1. The gross level is the body of flesh and blood, with its sensory apparatus.
2. The subtle level is the body of the subtle energy-system of *chakras* (energy-nodes), channels, energy-winds, and creative energy-drops.
3. The subtlest level of body is the subtlest energy-wind, which is the physical support or counterpart of the subtlest level of mental activity.

General tantra unites method and wisdom as two truths about the same phenomenon by taking them as a mind's:

1. actively producing, or at least having as its physical basis, the appearance of a Buddha-figure's body;
2. cognizing the voidness of that appearance.

According to the Gelug explanation, the phenomenon here in general tantra is the subtle level of mental activity - our usual mental cognition or yogic nonconceptual cognition. Two inseparable truths about this phenomenon are its cognitive aspect and its supporting subtle energy-wind. The appearance of a Buddha-figure that our usual mental cognition or yogic cognition produces is made from this subtle energy-wind. However, our subtle levels of

mental activity and body do not continue into enlightenment. They do not even continue during our death existence, before they reemerge with bardo.

In anuttarayoga, on the other hand, we access two aspects of the subtlest level of our mental activity - its clear light cognition and its subtlest energy-wind. Both continue into Buddhahood. Their continuums never cease, even during the period of death. In fact, the inseparable pair underlies every moment of our experience. As wisdom, we generate clear-light mental activity into nonconceptual cognition of voidness and, as method, we generate its supporting subtlest energy-wind into an appearance of a Buddha-figure. This appearance is called a "purified illusory body" (*dag-pa'i sgyu-lus*). It is purified of the emotional obscurations (*nyon-sgrib*) preventing liberation. Nonconceptual clear-light cognition of voidness is called "actual clear light" (*don-gyi 'od-gsal*).

Thus, the union of method and wisdom with the clear-light level in anuttarayoga is closer than that in general tantra because method and wisdom in anuttarayoga are not only inseparable. They are accessible each moment, as are the enlightening body and mind of a Buddha.

Moreover, all appearances made of subtle energy-wind appear to exist with true existence, which is not how they actually exist at all. Thus, with the subtle level of mental activity, cognition of the appearance of a Buddha-figure cannot occur simultaneously with either conceptual or nonconceptual cognition of voidness. As a union of method and wisdom, they can only alternate with equivalent cognitive manners of taking their objects.

In contrast, appearances made solely from subtlest energy-wind appear to exist in the manner in which they actually exist. They appear to exist as dependently-arising phenomena (*rten-'brel*, Skt. *pratityasamutpada*) - namely, as phenomena that arise as "this"s or "that"s dependently solely on what the mental labels for them refer to when imputed on a valid basis for labeling. Thus, because dependently-arising phenomena appear as absolutely devoid of existing with true existence, they can appear simultaneously with clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness.

Nonconceptual focus on an absence of true existence occludes (*khegs*, blocks) an appearance of true existence, because an absence and a presence of true existence are mutually exclusive. Such focus does not occlude, however, an appearance of a manner of existence that is absolutely devoid of true existence - namely, an appearance of dependently-arising existence. This is because an absence of true existence and a presence of dependently-arising existence are synonymous.

Thus, the union of method and wisdom in anuttarayoga is especially close because the equivalent manners of cognitively taking the inseparable pair - purified illusory body and actual clear light - can occur simultaneously.

### **Method in Terms of a Blissful Awareness**

In anuttarayoga tantra, method refers not only to producing the body of a Buddha from the subtlest energy-winds, but also to using a blissful awareness for the cognition of voidness. Occasionally, we differentiate the four classes of tantra according to progressively more intense levels of bliss (*bde-ba*).

1. Kriya tantra suggests the bliss from seeing a partner;
2. charya, from exchanging smiles;

3. yoga, from hugging or holding hands;
4. anuttarayoga, the bliss from sexual union with a partner.

The three lower classes of tantra, however, do not necessarily make explicit use of a blissful awareness as method. The four levels of bliss are analogies, made in terms of a feature found specifically in anuttarayoga, to indicate progressively more intense levels of mind in the four tantra classes.

Furthermore, the bliss of sexual union that anuttarayoga practice uses as a method is not the bliss of orgasm (' *dzag-bde*) that arises in ordinary sexual union. Tantra practice never entails orgasmic release or degenerate orgies. To think that it does is a complete misunderstanding of tantra. The point of generating a blissful awareness through the contact of the subtle energy-channels of the two sexual organs is that it naturally leads toward the subtlest level of mind. We wish to access, sustain, and use this clear-light level of mental activity for the cognition of voidness.

When we sneeze, yawn, faint, fall into deep sleep, die, or experience the most intense bliss of sexual union, the subtle energy-winds naturally draw inward and our mental activity approaches the subtlest level. With sneezing or yawning, it is extremely difficult to sustain in meditation the natural dissolution of the energy-winds so that we can focus for an extended period on voidness without the winds immediately exploding back out. Harnessing the fainting, sleeping, or dying state is likewise difficult, because the mind tends to be dull on those occasions. If, however, through advanced internal yoga methods, we gain control over our subtle energy-winds so that we can prevent their explosive release with orgasm, we can sustain the blissful awareness of union and its naturally resulting subtler level of mind. We can then use it to dissolve the energy-winds even further to the clear-light level and then to apply that blissful clear-light awareness to sustained cognition of voidness.

### The Two Sets of Obscuration

Two sets of fleeting stains obscure clear-light mental activity:

1. the emotional obscurations (obstacles) (*nyon-sgrib*) that are the disturbing emotions and attitudes and which prevent liberation;
2. the cognitive obscurations (*shes-sgrib*) regarding all knowables and which prevent the omniscience of enlightenment.

The *cognitive obscurations* include the constant habits (*bag-chags*, instincts) of grasping for true existence, which, Gelug-Prasangika uniquely asserts, produce appearances of true existence every moment of our conceptual and usual nonconceptual cognition. Because of producing such appearances, these constant habits prevent us from cognizing the two truths about anything simultaneously - its appearance and its voidness.

According to Gelug-Prasangika, the *emotional obscurations* include grasping for true existence (*bden-'dzin*), with which we believe that the appearances of true existence that we cognize correspond to reality. It also includes the disturbing emotions and attitudes - both doctrinally based (*kun-brtags*) and automatically arising (*lhan-skyes*) - which all derive from this grasping. Likewise, this set of obscurations also includes the legacies (*sa-bon*, seed, tendency) of both types of disturbing emotions and attitudes, which give rise to them intermittently.

- *Doctrinally based disturbing emotions and attitudes* derive from having studied and accepted distorted views of reality as taught by non-Prasangika tenet systems. Such disturbing emotions and attitudes arise only during conceptual cognition. Examples are the stubborn attachment and defensiveness that arise when someone challenges our incorrect beliefs.
- *Automatically-arising disturbing emotions and attitudes* arise even in nonconceptual sense cognition, such as the anger and attachment that arise in humans and animals when seeing someone grab their favorite toy away from them.

Nonconceptual cognition of voidness is the true pathway of mind that achieves a true stopping (true cessation) of the two sets of obscurations, such that they never recur. First, it eliminates the emotional obscurations. Only when it has removed all of them forever does it begin to eliminate the cognitive obscurations.

Moreover, nonconceptual cognition of voidness requires the force of a determination to be free (renunciation) to eliminate the emotional obscurations preventing liberation. It further requires bodhichitta to cut through the cognitive obscurations preventing omniscience. To cut through the subtlest level of this second set of obscurations, however, the nonconceptual cognition of voidness, held with the forces of renunciation and bodhichitta, must be with the clear-light level of mental activity.

### **The Necessity for a Blissful Awareness of Voidness**

Clear-light mental activity does not necessarily cognize voidness, although according to the explanation of the fifteenth-century Gelug master Kaydrub Norzang-gyatso (*mKhas-grub Nor-bzang rgya-mtsho*), it naturally produces a cognitive appearance similar to that of voidness. Nor is clear-light cognition necessarily blissful, for instance in death. Nevertheless, by using the bliss of sexual union as a method for accessing our subtlest level of mental activity and then for cognizing voidness with that blissful clear-light mind, anuttarayoga practice leads to the most efficient cognitive tool for cutting through all obscurations.

The anuttarayoga cognitive tool, then, is simultaneously:

- a clear-light level of mental activity,
- a blissful awareness,
- a nonconceptual cognition of voidness,
- a cognition held with the force of the determination to be free,
- a cognition held with the force of bodhichitta.

A blissful awareness, a nonconceptual cognition of voidness, and a clear-light cognition are not necessarily inseparable phenomena - one can occur in a moment of cognition without the others simultaneously occurring. Nevertheless, anuttarayoga practice makes them inseparable truths about the same phenomenon: one moment of cognition.

In other words, just as one can hit a target with different arrows, one can use a variety of minds to gain nonconceptual cognition of voidness. Anuttarayoga uses a blissful clear-light mind, gained through blissful awareness on grosser levels, as the arrow for nonconceptually perceiving voidness. In this way, blissful clear-light awareness is the mind with nonconceptual cognition of voidness, and thus the union of method and wisdom in anuttarayoga is especially close. Gelug calls this closeness "inseparable voidness and bliss."

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [Relationships between Two Objects in Anuttarayoga Tantra](#) {14} {19}.]

## Yab-Yum

The graphic representation of Buddha-figure couples in union symbolizes method and wisdom as two inseparable truths about one phenomenon - clear-light cognition. *Yab-yum*, the Tibetan term for the couple, does not mean male and female, or masculine and feminine. It means father and mother. When the causes for the body and mind of a Buddha are made inseparable truths about clear-light mental activity, they give birth to enlightenment, as a sexually united father and mother do to a child.

In short, the subtlest energy-wind and the clear-light mental activity that it supports are already inseparable truths about clear-light mental activity. Anuttarayoga practice generates the subtlest energy-wind in the form of a Buddha-figure couple - not just in the form of one member of the couple - and the clear-light mental activity as a nonconceptual cognition of voidness. Moreover, it accesses the clear-light level through a blissful awareness, and in doing so, generates clear-light cognition as inseparably a blissful awareness. Thus, anuttarayoga takes clear-light cognition of voidness as wisdom and, as method, both makes it inseparably a blissful awareness and makes the energy-wind that already is inseparable with it appear in the form of a Buddha-figure couple.

### (3) Special Basis for Voidness

In anuttarayoga tantra, the special basis for voidness is not simply the body of a Buddha-figure generated from the subtle energy-winds of our imaginations, as in general tantra. It is such a body generated from the subtlest energy-winds of our clear-light minds. Since the clear-light level of mental activity underlies each moment of our experience, the energy-wind of that level is always available for use in meditation. Thus, anuttarayoga provides an even more stable basis for voidness upon which to focus than does general tantra.

### (4) Special Level of Mental Activity

#### Introductory Remarks

Regardless of which level of mind we use to cognize voidness, voidness itself remains the same. The absence of impossible ways of existing understood in bodhisattva sutra and all four classes of tantra is the same. Using the subtlest clear-light level of mental activity for this cognition, however, has many additional advantages besides its being always available for practice. This is because clear-light cognition of voidness does not require three zillion (countless) eons to cut through the emotional and cognitive obscurations, as does sutra practice.

According to Gelug-Prasangika, sutra practice requires:

1. A zillion eons to reach yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness and thus a seeing pathway mind (path of seeing), with the elimination forever of doctrinally based disturbing emotions and attitudes and their legacies.
2. A second set of zillion eons to eliminate forever the rest of the emotional obscurations preventing liberation and thus to attain the eighth out of ten levels of bhumi mind of arya bodhisattvas (*byang-sa*). The first seven levels of bhumi mind are unpurified

bhumi minds (*ma-dag-pa'i sa*) - in other words, levels of a highly realized bodhisattva mind not fully purified of the emotional obscurations;

3. A third set of zillion eons to eliminate forever the cognitive obscurations preventing omniscience and thus to complete the attainment of the last three levels of bhumi mind of arya bodhisattvas, the purified bhumi minds (*dag-pa'i sa*) and attain enlightenment.

### **Clear-Light Mental Activity Is Naturally Nonconceptual**

The subtle level of mental activity, the second of the three levels of mind, may be either conceptual or nonconceptual. Staying on this level requires the first zillion eons of strengthening our enlightenment-building networks of positive force and deep awareness in order for our cognition of voidness to become nonconceptual. This is because our mental activity remains on the same level of subtlety as is conceptual cognition. Consequently, our trying to gain nonconceptual cognition of voidness with this level of mind resembles a rabbit's trying to escape from a fox while remaining on the ground with the fox. Even if the rabbit hides, the fox can still find and catch it.

Clear-light mental activity, in contrast, is subtler than all levels of conceptual cognition and thus is exclusively nonconceptual. Therefore, gaining nonconceptual cognition of voidness with a clear-light mind is like the rabbit diving into a deep hole. Just in so doing, it escapes the fox. As soon as we access this subtlest level and focus it on voidness, our cognition of voidness is automatically nonconceptual. It automatically rids us forever of doctrinally based disturbing emotions and attitudes. The first zillion eons are not required.

Moreover, because anuttarayoga accesses clear-light cognition through generating a blissful awareness and dissolving the subtle energy-winds in the central channel, the nonconceptuality of clear-light mind is easier to maintain than the nonconceptuality of grosser levels.

### **Clear-Light Mental Activity Is Naturally Free of All Disturbing Emotions and Attitudes**

During nonconceptual total absorption on voidness, all disturbing emotions and attitudes are absent, whether we use the subtle or the subtlest level of mind for this cognition. With the subtle mind, however, held by the force of bodhichitta, the initial nonconceptual absorption on voidness removes forever only the disturbing emotions and attitudes that are doctrinally based. Total elimination (true cessation) of the automatically-arising disturbing emotions and attitudes, such that they never arise again, requires a second zillion eons.

Disturbing emotions and attitudes may accompany only gross and subtle mental activities - our usual sensory and mental cognitions. Clear-light mental activity, on the other hand, being subtler than these two levels of mind, is naturally free of all disturbing emotions and attitudes. By the power of this natural absence, the initial clear-light absorption on voidness has the force to remove forever the doctrinally based and automatically-arising disturbing emotions and attitudes simultaneously. An additional second set of zillion eons is not required. Nonconceptual clear-light cognition of voidness and the total removal of all emotional obscurations preventing liberation occur simultaneously.

### **Clear-Light Mental Activity Does Not Produce Appearances of True Existence**

The subtle level of mental activity, whether conceptual or nonconceptual, produces appearances only of true existence. Therefore, when subtle mental activity nonconceptually

cognizes voidness, it cannot simultaneously give rise to any appearance. One moment of mind cannot cognize an absolute absence of true existence and simultaneously make an appearance of true existence. The two are mutually exclusive. Thus, because subtle mental activity can only produce and cognize an unpurified appearance of something, it cannot cognize the two truths about anything simultaneously: that object's appearance and its actual mode of existence.

Clear-light cognition, on the other hand, produces only purified appearances - appearances of a mode of existence totally devoid of all impossible ways. Thus, clear-light cognition - and only clear light cognition - can simultaneously cognize appearances and voidness. Specifically, it can simultaneously cognize appearances of a mode of existence devoid of true existence and an absolute absence of true existence. For this reason, even in sutra and the three lower classes of tantra, one needs ultimately to access and use clear-light mental activity for cognizing voidness. This is in order to cognize the two truths about things simultaneously, as a Buddha's omniscient awareness does.

Using the sutra methods requires a third zillion eons to achieve clear-light cognition of voidness. The methods of the three lower tantras bring it more quickly, but still require a great amount of time. In either case, this clear-light cognition occurs only during the final phase of practice before Buddhahood, namely at the final phase of a tenth -level bhumi mind. Anuttarayoga accesses it already when first gaining nonconceptual cognition of voidness - in other words, with the attainment of a seeing pathway mind and a first level bhumi mind. Thus, anuttarayoga does not require the third zillion eons to gain simultaneous cognition of the superficial and deepest truths about the Buddha-figure body that it makes appear. Nevertheless, anuttarayoga still requires considerable familiarization with cognizing the two truths simultaneously, in order to maintain such cognition as a Buddha does, without any break.

### **Clear-Light Mental Activity Can Have Omniscient Awareness**

The mode of existence with which everything actually exists, and which clear-light mental activity cognizes simultaneously with everything's absence of existing in impossible ways, is as dependently-arising phenomena. Everything arises or exists dependently on, or in relation to:

1. a basis for labeling, a mental label, and what the mental label refers to;
2. parts;
3. in the case of nonstatic (impermanent) phenomena, causes and conditions.

Moreover, everything arises or exists interrelatedly and interdependently. Everything that occurs at this moment

1. has arisen dependently on everything that has ever occurred before, such as history and so on;
2. is interconnected with everything else that is occurring now;
3. will affect everything that will occur in the future.

Thus, in accurately cognizing the interdependence and interrelatedness of everything, clear-light mental activity becomes omniscient awareness.

When first accessed, however, clear-light mind does not function omnisciently. Although it is naturally free of the emotional obscurations that are disturbing emotions and attitudes, it is not free of the cognitive obscurations regarding all knowables. This latter set of obscurations gives rise to appearances of true existence, although not while clear-light mental activity is manifest.

So long as the appearance-making of true existence can recur, the cognitive obscurations still exist as what can be labeled or imputed on the mental continuum. When clear-light mental activity can be maintained forever, without any break, the existence of the cognitive obscurations can no longer be imputed on that mental continuum. At this point, the clear-light mental activity of that mental continuum becomes omniscient awareness. This is the attainment of only a Buddha. Because of its special practices with clear-light mental activity, anuttarayoga does not require the third zillion eons to reach this omniscient state.

## 9 Non-Gelug Variations Concerning General Anuttarayoga

The non-Gelug traditions agree with most points made by Gelug concerning why anuttarayoga is a more efficient and speedier path than the three lower tantras. We need to note, however, the following additions or variations.

### (1) Closer Analogies

#### General Sakya Anuttarayoga

When meditating in analogy to death, bardo, and rebirth, Sakya emphasizes purifying the past - namely, our deaths from our immediately preceding lives, the bardos that ensued, and our present rebirths. *Purifying*, here, means eliminating being under the influence of our previous karma.

#### Nyingma and Kagyu Practices Influenced by Nyingma

In Nyingma and in Kagyu practices influenced by Nyingma, the three-part analogy also corresponds to the three progressively grosser aspects of rigpa. In terms of rigpa, the analogies also work both downward as the unrealized Buddha-nature and upward as the fully realized Buddha-nature of an enlightened being.

1. The essential nature (*ngo-bo*) of rigpa is its primal purity (*ka-dag*), its absence of all fleeting grosser levels of mental activity and of all impossible ways of existing.
2. Its influence (*'phrin-las*) is its compassionate responsiveness (*thugs-rje*, compassion), its communicative activity.
3. Its functional nature (*rang-bzhin*) is that it spontaneously establishes appearances (*lhun-grub*), based on its responsiveness.

Thus, in anuttarayoga practice or its dzogchen equivalent:

1. analogous to death, sleep, dharmakaya, and rigpa's primal purity, we access the subtlest level of mental activity;
2. analogous to bardo, the dream state, sambhogakaya as subtle forms or speech, and rigpa's compassionate responsiveness, we arise, within the state of rigpa, as



compassion;

3. analogous to birth, the awake state, nirmanakaya, and rigpa's spontaneously establishing appearances, we arise within a state of compassion in the form of seed-syllables and, from them, as Buddha-figures.

Equivalent to Nyingma practice analogous to the subtle movement of rigpa with compassion is the anuttarayoga practice of inciting by songs (*glus-bskul*), found in both the non-Gelug and Gelug traditions. Incited by female Buddhas singing songs of the four immeasurable attitudes (*mtshams-med bzhi*, four *Brahma-viharas*) of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity, we arise from focus on voidness and appear in subtle forms to help others. This is analogous to dharmakaya appearing as sambhogakaya.

### **Sakya Tradition of Lamdray**

The Sakya tradition of *lamdray* (*lam-'bras*, the path together with its results), practiced in conjunction with the Buddha-figure Hevajra (*Kyai rdo-rje*), includes further analogies in meditation.

As human beings, our subtle bodies have as provisional all-encompassing foundations (*gnas-skabs-kyi kun-gzhi*, provisional *alaya*) the four mandala-seats (*gdan dkyil-'khor bzhi*):

1. energy-channels,
2. subtle syllables within them,
3. creative energy-drops,
4. energy-winds.

Based on these, the appearance-making aspects (*gsal-cha*, clarity aspect) of our subtlest clear-light minds, as our ultimate all-encompassing foundations (*mthar-thug-gi kun-gzhi*, ultimate *alaya*), produce two inseparable quantum levels of unpurified appearances of our bodies, speech, minds, and the inseparable simultaneity of the three. The two quantum levels are their gross appearances in our usual human forms and their subtle appearances as Buddha-figures.

By meditating in analogy with the four mandala-seats, we purify ourselves of the four, in the sense of achieving a true stopping of them. Consequently, the appearance-making aspects of our clear-light minds analogously give rise on the path to two inseparable quantum levels of purified appearances of body, speech, mind, and the inseparable simultaneity of the three. Through further practice, on the resultant level, the appearance-making aspects of our enlightening clear-light minds give rise to the two inseparable quantum levels of gross enlightening appearances of nirmanakaya and the subtle enlightening ones of sambhogakaya.

## **(2) Closer Union of Method and Wisdom**

According to the nineteenth-century Rimey (nonsectarian movement) master Jamyang-kyentsey-wangpo ('*Jam-dbyangs mkhyen-rtse dbang-po*), many of the seeming contradictions in the explanations of the four Tibetan traditions arise because of a difference in viewpoint from which each approaches the Dharma.

1. The Gelug tradition explains from the point of view of the basis,
2. Sakya from the path,
3. Kagyu and Nyingma from the point of view of the result.

For example,

1. Gelug asserts that clear-light mind is not innately blissful, because, ordinarily, clear-light cognition at the moment of death is not blissful.
2. Because anuttarayoga practitioners on the path generate clear-light cognition into a blissful awareness, Sakya describes clear-light mind as naturally blissful. It is the "youth of the mind."
3. Since the omniscient clear-light awareness of a Buddha is blissful and all Buddha-qualities are already complete in clear-light mind or rigpa, Kagyu and Nyingma also assert clear-light mind as a blissful awareness.

Thus, because of the pathway and resultant viewpoints from which the non-Gelug traditions describe clear-light mental activity, they assert that blissful awareness as method in anuttarayoga is especially close to clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness as wisdom. We need merely to enhance the blissful awareness that is already there, or remove the obscurations preventing its full functioning, in order to reach or access the blissful awareness of the clear-light mind.

### **(3) Special Basis for Voidness**

#### **Sakya and Kagyu Explanation**

According to the Sakya and Kagyu traditions, a purified illusory body is a more special basis for voidness than the purified appearance of the body of a Buddha-figure that appears during yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness in sutra and the three lower tantras. Purified illusory bodies and the purified appearances that occur during yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness are both made from the subtlest energy-winds. Nevertheless, the grosser energy-winds that can fabricate and project dualistic appearances onto such appearances are still present on the level of yogic cognition. As is the case with disturbing emotions and attitudes, the undissolved subtle energy-winds can destabilize and in a sense infect the purified appearances. A purified illusory body avoids such dangers of infection from dualistic appearance-making, and thus serves as a basis particularly conducive for focusing simultaneously on its voidness.

#### **Nyingma Explanation**

The Nyingma dzogchen tradition does not explain pure appearances in terms of subtlest energy-wind. Instead, it explains them as the natural effulgence (*rtsal*) of rigpa, deriving from rigpa's functional nature of spontaneously establishing appearances. The essential nature of rigpa is its primal purity, namely its voidness. Thus rigpa's functional nature and essential nature, namely its pure appearances and its voidness, are two aspects of the same phenomenon.

The Nyingma presentations of bodhisattva sutra and the three lower tantras do not include discussions of rigpa or methods for accessing it. Although yogic nonconceptual cognition also cognizes pure appearances, the cognition of them is still on the level of limited awareness. Consequently, limited awareness can destabilize or infect these appearances.

## (4) Special Level of Mental Activity

### Introductory Remarks Concerning the Two Sets of Obscurations

The Karma Kagyu presentation of the Prasangika Madhyamaka assertion of the two sets of obscurations and the stages in which they are eliminated agrees, in structure, with the Gelug-Prasangika view. As I do not have sufficient information to outline the Karma Kagyu presentation of these points in terms of its Maha-Madhyamaka view followed in tantra, let us restrict our discussion here to the Nyingma and Sakya positions. The Nyingma and Sakya traditions assert that both the Prasangika-Madhyamaka and Svatantrika-Madhyamaka schools accept the presentation of the two obscurations that Gelug and Karma Kagyu assert that only Svatantrika-Madhyamaka accepts.

If we simplify the Nyingma and Sakya positions, then

- The emotional obscurations include the unawareness associated with grasping for an impossible "soul" of persons (gang-zag-gi bdag-'dzin , grasping for the self of persons). This is grasping for persons to have a soul that is a nonstatic, monolithic entity separate from the aggregates or that is self-sufficiently knowable. Also included among this set of obscurations are the legacies (sa-bon , seeds, tendencies) of this unawareness, plus all the disturbing emotions and attitudes, as well as their legacies.
- The cognitive obscurations include the unawareness associated with grasping for an impossible "soul" of phenomena (chos-kyi bdag-'dzin , grasping for the self of phenomena). This refers to grasping for all phenomena, including persons, to have truly established existence. Also included among this set of obscurations are the habits (bag-chags ) of this unawareness, plus the habits of all the emotional obscurations.

Shravakas (nyan-thos , listeners to Buddha's teachings, striving to become arhats, liberated beings) achieve a true stopping of only the first set of obscurations. They do this with cognition of an absolute absence of the impossible "soul" of persons defined as above. From the shravaka point of view, this cognition is nonconceptual, but from a bodhisattva viewpoint, it is still subtly conceptual because absolute absences are objects only of conceptual cognition.

Gelug, in contrast, asserts that shravakas and bodhisattvas nonconceptually cognize the same voidness. The voidness they nonconceptually cognize in common is an absolute absence of true existence. Karma Kagyu agrees with Gelug on these points only in terms of sutra Prasangika. From the point of Karma Kagyu Maha-Madhyamaka, only bodhisattvas cognize voidness beyond words and concepts and

All traditions agree that bodhisattva practitioners, both of sutra and of tantra, achieve a true stopping of both sets of obscurations. According to Nyingma and Sakya, in gaining nonconceptual cognition of voidness that is beyond words and concepts with respect to all phenomena, bodhisattva practitioners also gain this cognition with respect to persons. Although they finish removing the first set of obscurations before completing removal of the second, they start to eliminate the two sets of obscurations simultaneously, rather than consecutively as Gelug and Karma Kagyu Prasangika theories assert.

The non-Gelug traditions include three positions concerning the realization that eliminates forever the two sets of obscurations.

1. The mainstream Sakya tradition asserts voidness beyond words and concepts as self-voidness, an ontological state. Thus, voidness nonconceptually realized in bodhisattva sutra and tantra is the same.
2. The Nyingma tradition asserts voidness beyond words and concepts in both a self-void and other-void sense. Bodhisattva sutra and tantra practitioners realize the same self-voidness, but only practitioners of dzogchen realize other-voidness as the cognitive state of rigpa.
3. The Karma and Shangpa Kagyu Maha-Madhyamaka traditions assert voidness beyond words and concepts as other-voidness. They use the term "self-voidness" only in the sense of a nonimplicative negation, an absolute absence. Although the manner of other-voidness is also beyond words and concepts, they do not call that manner of existence "self-voidness." Other-voidness is beyond self-voidness in the way that they define self-voidness. Thus, although the manner of existence of all phenomena nonconceptually realized in bodhisattva sutra and tantra is the same, the attainment of other-voidness realized in bodhisattva sutra and the three lower tantras is not the definitive other-voidness realized in anuttarayoga.

As in Gelug, non-Gelug asserts that attainment of a bodhisattva seeing pathway mind, then an eighth level bhumi mind of an arya bodhisattva (the first of the three purified bhumi minds), and then enlightenment requires a zillion eons each when practicing only the bodhisattva sutra methods.

### **Clear-Light Mental Activity Is Naturally Nonconceptual**

The non-Gelug systems agree with Gelug that because clear-light mental activity is automatically nonconceptual, it is free of the shortcomings of gaining nonconceptual cognition of voidness while remaining on the same level of mind as conceptual cognition. Gaining nonconceptual cognition of voidness does not require a zillion eons.

### **Clear-Light Mental Activity is Naturally Free of All Disturbing Emotions and Attitudes**

#### **Assertions Common to All Non-Gelug Traditions**

The non-Gelug schools also agree with Gelug that clear-light cognition is naturally free of all disturbing emotions and attitudes, both conceptually based and automatically arising. In accordance with their definitions of the two sets of obscurations, clear-light cognition is also naturally free of unawareness about the actual mode of existence of both persons and all phenomena.

Although yogic nonconceptual cognition of the voidness of phenomena attained in bodhisattva sutra and the three lower tantras is also free of these obscurations, it is still at the subtle level of mind at which all of them occur.

#### **Assertions Specific to Nyingma**

According to Nyingma, yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness gained on the bodhisattva sutra path requires a zillion eons to eliminate forever:

1. the doctrinally based emotional obscurations,
2. the doctrinally based cognitive obscurations.

A second set of zillion eons is required for this yogic cognition to eliminate forever:

1. the automatically arising emotional obscurations,
2. the first six out of nine grades of automatically arising cognitive obscurations.

Clear-light mind accessed through anuttarayoga methods, on the other hand, has enhanced power from the preceding generation of bliss and preceding dissolution of the energy-winds in meditation. This is still the case even when, in dzogchen practice, the generation and dissolution do not immediately precede the manifestation of rigpa, but have occurred during earlier anuyoga practice. Further, rigpa made manifest through the dzogchen methods has the additional power of the dzogchen methods.

Clear-light mental activity not only has enhanced efficiency and sustainability; it is deeper than the level at which the disturbing emotions and attitudes operate. Thus, the initial attainment of clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness totally eliminates all the disturbing emotions and attitudes, including unawareness regarding persons - both doctrinally based and automatically arising - and their legacies and habits. Because it is deeper than the conceptual level, its first attainment also eliminates doctrinally based unawareness about phenomena and its habit.

In other words, the initial-level attainment of clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness eliminates forever the emotional obscurations and the doctrinally based cognitive obscurations. Thus, except for the first six out of nine grades of the automatically arising cognitive obscurations - namely, the first six out of nine grades of automatically arising unawareness about phenomena, and their habits - it totally eliminates all the other obscurations that would otherwise take two sets of zillion eons to remove.

### **Assertions Unique to Sakya**

According to the Sakya explanation, the initial attainment of yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness in bodhisattva sutra and the three lower tantras and of clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness in anuttarayoga equally eliminate forever:

1. the doctrinally based and automatically arising emotional obscurations,
2. the doctrinally based cognitive obscurations.

Thus, all the emotional obscurations, together with the doctrinally based obscurations preventing omniscience, are eliminated forever all at once, regardless of the bodhisattva method used for attaining nonconceptual cognition of voidness beyond words and concepts. This attainment through yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness gained through bodhisattva sutra methods requires a zillion eons. When attained through clear-light nonconceptual cognition gained through anuttarayoga methods, it needs much less time.

A second zillion eons is required in bodhisattva sutra to attain yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness effortlessly and spontaneously, so as to eliminate forever:

1. the first six of the nine grades of the automatically arising cognitive obscurations.

Because of the exceptional methods of anuttarayoga that dissolve the grosser levels of mental activity on which unawareness about phenomena operates, clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness is much easier to reach spontaneously and effortlessly than is yogic

nonconceptual cognition of voidness with other methods. Thus, anuttarayoga does not require a second set of zillion eons.

### **Clear-Light Mental Activity Does Not Produce Appearances of Any of the Four Extreme Modes of Impossible Existence**

According to the Nyingma and Sakya explanations in common, yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness in sutra requires a third set of zillion eons to eliminate forever:

(1) the final three out of nine grades of automatically arising cognitive obscurations.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: Ridding Oneself of the Two Sets of Obscurations in Sutra and Anuttarayoga Tantra According to Nyingma and Sakya {15}. See also: The Five Pathway Minds (Five Paths): Advanced Presentation {16}.]

Conceptual cognition produces appearances of objects as truly existent "this"s and "that"s. Sensory and mental nonconceptual cognitions produce appearances of objects as not truly existent "this"s and "that"s. Both appearances are unpurified appearances, because conceptual and nonconceptual cognition of them are both accompanied by unawareness.

1. Conceptual cognition is accompanied by the unawareness of not knowing how what appears exists and taking it to exist in a manner contradictory to how it actually exists.
2. Sensory and mental nonconceptual cognitions are accompanied by simply the unawareness of not knowing how what appears actually exists.

The habits of the unawareness included among the emotional obscurations produce the appearances of truly existent "this"s and "that"s during conceptual cognition. The habits of the unawareness included among the cognitive obscurations produce the appearances of objects as not truly "this"s and "that"s.

When we have eliminated forever the emotional obscurations, our conceptual cognitions no longer produce appearances of truly existent "this"s and "that"s. Only when we have totally removed the final three grades of cognitive obscurations do our sensory and mental nonconceptual cognitions stop producing appearances of objects as not truly existent "this"s and "that"s. At that point, as Buddhas, we no longer experience sensory or mental cognition. The omniscient awareness of a Buddha is beyond both.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: Divisions, Causes, and Elimination of Unpurified Appearances According to Non-Gelug {9} {13} {17}.]

Eliminating the final group of obscurations with clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness beyond words and concepts does not require the third set of zillion eons that doing so with yogic nonconceptual cognition of it requires in sutra. This is because, like omniscient awareness, clear-light mental activity is beyond sensory and mental cognition and does not produce appearances of either truly existent or not truly existent "this"s and "that"s. It is subtler than the levels of mind that produce these unpurified appearances. Clear-light nonconceptual cognition of nondenumerable voidness, when manifest, gives rise exclusively to purified appearances.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: Alaya and Impure Appearance-Making {10} {18}.]

Further, the third group of obscurations prevents nonconceptual cognition of voidness beyond words and concepts from cognizing purified appearances and voidness simultaneously with equal prominence and from cognizing them without a break in continuity. Only clear-light mental activity is capable of such cognition, because only it continues without disruption and only it continues into enlightenment. The subtle level of mental activity at which yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness operates cannot be sustained during the experience of death and it ceases altogether with enlightenment.

### **Clear-Light Mental Activity Has More Stable Reflexive Deep Awareness of Its Own Nature**

Clear-light mental activity lacks all forms of unawareness, including the unawareness of not knowing how things actually exist. This is because it is subtler than the levels at which unawareness manifestly occurs. Moreover, not only does it lack unawareness, it naturally has the reflexive deep awareness (*rang-rig ye-shes*) of how everything actually does exist.

Yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness attained in bodhisattva sutra and the three lower tantras also has reflexive deep awareness. Nevertheless, yogic cognition is still at the level of mind at which this deep awareness may not be operational. Consequently, the reflexive deep awareness of clear-light cognition is more stable.

### **Clear-Light Mental Activity Can Have Omniscient Awareness**

Words and concepts imply an impossible mode of existence - namely, that things exist in the solid categories delineated by them. In other words, words and concepts imply that the fabric of the interrelatedness of everything is divided into boxes or categories, with solid lines around them, and that phenomena in these boxes or categories correspond to reality. This is not so. It is an impossible mode of existence.

Nonconceptual cognition of voidness beyond words and concepts, whether with yogic cognition or clear-light mental activity, does not produce unpurified appearances of any of the four extreme modes of impossible existence. Thus, it does not produce appearances of things existing in the solid categories of truly existent "this"s or "that"s or not truly existent "this"s or "that"s. In this sense, the purified appearances that nonconceptual cognition of nondenumerable voidness produces are beyond words and concepts.

Only clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness, however, can give rise to the entire fabric of the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of everything. Only clear-light mental activity can become omniscient awareness. This is true because of the following line of reasoning.

- Clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness gives rise to purified appearances simultaneously with their voidness. Nevertheless, it cannot do so at first with both appearances and voidness being equally prominent. The same is true concerning yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness beyond words and concepts.
- So long as the unpurified appearance-making of conceptual cognition can recur, the habits of unawareness of how phenomena exist, which give rise to unpurified appearance-making, can still be imputed on the mental continuum. These habits do not produce unpurified appearances while purified appearances are arising. Nevertheless, their unpurified appearance-making in a sense infects the purified appearances.

Because of that, a cognition producing purified appearances is not omniscient so long as these habits can still be imputed, whether the cognition is with clear-light cognition or yogic cognition.

- Unlike yogic nonconceptual cognition of voidness, clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness can be sustained forever without any break. When, with the removal forever of the obscurations regarding all knowables, this clear-light cognition can be so sustained, the habits of unawareness that produce unpurified appearances can no longer be imputed on the mental continuum. Because of that, the clear-light cognition can occur with purified appearances and voidness being equally prominent. When this is the case, clear-light mental activity cognizes the entire fabric of all that is knowable. Thus, it becomes the omniscient awareness of a Buddha.

The interrelatedness of everything does not mean that the accurate mode of existence of everything is as an undifferentiated oneness. Within the fabric of interconnectedness, everything still maintains its individuality. Nevertheless, things exist maintaining their individualities in a manner that is beyond the solid boxes that would correspond to the words and concepts for them.

Yogic and clear-light nonconceptual cognition of nondenumerable voidness and omniscient awareness all naturally have the deep awareness cognizing individuality (*so-sor rtogs-pa'i ye-shes*). Because only clear-light mental activity has the capacity to function as the omniscient awareness of a Buddha, only its innate deep awareness cognizing individuality has the capacity to cognize the individuality of everything.

## 10 Kalachakra

### (1) Closer Analogies

*The Kalachakra Tantra* has many unique features not shared in common with the other anuttarayoga Buddha-figure systems. The upward and downward analogies of general anuttarayoga still pertain to its practice, except that Kalachakra does not entail practice analogous to bardo and sambhogakaya. It has practices analogous only to death and dharmakaya, and to rebirth and nirmanakaya. This is for reasons explained below. Nevertheless, Kalachakra practice involves additional downward and upward analogies.

*Kalachakra (Dus-'khor)* means cycles of time and there are three such cycles, each of which is analogous to the other two:

1. external cycles of time, through which the universe passes,
2. internal cycles, through which the body passes,
3. alternative cycles, referring to the Kalachakra empowerment and practice, and to enlightenment.

The external and internal cycles describe samsara. They repeat uncontrollably because of the winds of karma (*las-kyi rlung*) and the unawareness of reality that drives these winds. The alternative cycles of time purify us of the true causes for experiencing the true problems of the external and internal cycles.

For example, the external cycles entail, for a universe:



## Making Sense of Tantra

1. eons of formation,
2. eons of endurance,
3. eons of disintegration,
4. empty eons.

For a year:

1. spring, when foliage grows,
2. summer, when it endures,
3. autumn, when foliage falls apart,
4. winter, when the trees are empty.

Analogous to the external cycles, the internal cycles include the karmic winds passing through *four subtle creative energy-drops* (*thig-le bzhi*) in the subtle body, producing the appearances of the four occasions (*gnas-skabs bzhi*). Appearances may be of sights, sounds, odors, tastes, physical sensations, or ways of being aware of something, such as bliss.

1. The body creative-drop produces the appearances experienced while awake, which grow through sensory experience.
2. The speech creative-drop produces the appearances experienced while dreaming, which are enduring images that do not organically grow or age.
3. The mind creative-drop produces the appearances experienced in deep dreamless sleep, when external sensory experience falls away.
4. The deep-awareness creative-drop produces the appearances experienced during orgasmic release, which are the gateways to the subtlest level of experience, empty of all grosser levels.

Through practices that parallel the four occasions, we achieve a Buddha's

1. nirmanakaya, with enlightening appearances that arise and appear to grow,
2. sambhogakaya, with enlightening appearances that endure until the end of everyone's samsara,
3. jnana-dharmakaya (*ye-shes chos-sku*, corpus of deep awareness encompassing everything), in which all conceptual cognition and limitations have fallen away,
4. svabhavakaya (*ngo-bo-nyid sku*, nature corpus), which, uniquely in Kalachakra, is the blissful awareness of omniscient awareness.

The external, internal, and alternative cycles share many other analogous features, such as:

1. externally, the six months each of the northern and southern declinations of the sun, and the six types of subatomic particles;
2. internally, the six aggregate factors of experience, the six bodily elements, the six types of primary consciousness, the six cognitive sensors, and so forth;
3. alternatively, the six Buddha-families of the Kalachakra mandala, and the five types of deep awareness (five Buddha-wisdoms) plus clear-light awareness itself as their basis.

In addition, the physical proportions of the universe, the human body, the Kalachakra mandala, and its principal figure parallel each other.

## (2) Closer Union of Method and Wisdom

In Kalachakra, wisdom refers to the nonconceptual clear-light cognition of voidness without aspect (*rnam-med*) and with aspect (*rnam-can*). *Voidness without aspect* is voidness itself - either as self-voidness, other-voidness, or both, depending on the Tibetan tradition. *Voidness with aspect* is the devoid-form (*stong-gzugs*) of a Buddha-figure.

*Devoid forms* are devoid of the gross particles of the elements, and are the reflexive appearances (*rang-snang*) of the clear-light mind that arise when the energy-winds enter the central energy-channel. They resemble appearances that arise on a magic-mirror (*phra-phab*) and may be in any form, not only that of a Buddha-figure.

The fourteenth-century Gelug master Gyaltsab Jey (*rGyal-tshab rJe Dar-ma Rin-chen*) explains that devoid forms are devoid of the gross particles of the elements in both senses of the superficial truth of gross particles - what they are and how they appear to exist. On the one hand, devoid-forms are not made of gross particles and are therefore a form of physical phenomenon that is subtler than they are. On the other hand, they do not appear to exist with true existence. The gross particles of the elements always appear to be truly existent.

The energy-winds do not need to be dissolved in the central channel and, consequently, clear-light mental activity does not need to be manifest for devoid-forms to appear. Moreover, even if clear-light mental activity is manifest, it does not need to cognize voidness in order for devoid-forms to arise.

Method in Kalachakra is *unchanging blissful awareness* (*mi-'gyur-ba'i bde-ba*). This is a blissful clear-light nonconceptual awareness of voidness; but unlike in general anuttarayoga tantra, it is based on two sets of 21,600 subtle creative energy-drops stacked one by one in the central channel. The two sets are different from the four subtle creative-drops of the four occasions.

Although unchanging blissful awareness is intermittent - it occurs only during total absorption on voidness - the stacked drops remain fixed until the attainment of enlightenment. Because of that, the blissful awareness is "unchanging." With the attainment of enlightenment, we no longer have gross or subtle bodies. Our former samsaric bodies, the stacked drops, and the four drops of the four occasions all disappear like a rainbow.

In general anuttarayoga,

1. blissful awareness and illusory body are on the side of method;
2. clear-light cognition of voidness is on the side of wisdom.

Thus, the obtaining causes for the enlightening bodies and mind of a Buddha are on the sides of method and wisdom respectively.

In Kalachakra,

1. unchanging blissful awareness is on the method side;
2. devoid-forms and clear-light cognition of voidness are on the wisdom side.

Thus, the obtaining causes for enlightening bodies and mind are both on the wisdom side. They share the same similar-family cause (*rigs-'dra'i rgyu*).

A *similar-family cause* is one that is in the same family of phenomena as its result and, in a sense, serves as the model for its result. For example, the model of a vase is the similar-family cause for both a clay vase and a visualized vase. The model of a vase, a clay vase, and a visualized vase are all in the same family of phenomena - vases.

In Kalachakra, sharing the same similar-family cause are

1. unchanging blissful clear-light cognition of voidness, and
2. the devoid-forms that both give rise to this cognition and are the reflexive appearance of this cognition.

The similar-family cause that they share is the total absorption of clear-light cognition of voidness. In this respect, Kalachakra has a closer union of method and wisdom than does general anuttarayoga.

[For a more advanced discussion, see: [Relationships between Two Objects in Anuttarayoga Tantra](#) {14} {19}.]

### **(3) Special Basis for Voidness**

In general anuttarayoga, only a purified illusory body as a basis for voidness can appear during total absorption on voidness with actual clear-light cognition. This is because only purified illusory bodies are made solely from the subtlest energy-wind, which is only accessible when the actual subtlest clear-light level is reached. Further, because appearances made solely from the subtlest energy-wind do not appear to be truly existent, they can appear simultaneously with their absolute absence of impossible ways of existing.

Before achieving actual clear-light cognition of voidness, we practice with an unpurified illusory body or with the imagined bodies of Buddha-figures, both of which are made from grosser levels of energy-wind. According to Gelug, grosser levels of energy-wind make only appearances of true existence. Because of that, such bases for voidness can only appear during the subsequent realization period when the level of mental activity and thus the energy-winds are grosser. Even when total absorption on voidness is conceptual, such bodies - appearing to be truly existent - cannot appear simultaneously with an appearance of empty space representing an absolute absence of the appearance of true existence.

Devoid-forms, as bases for voidness, on the other hand, are reflections of clear-light mental activity and thus do not appear to be truly existent. They appear once the energy-winds have been made to enter the central channel, whether or not clear-light mental activity is manifest, and whether or not cognition is nonconceptual. Because they do not appear as truly existent, they cannot arise while the mind is simultaneously giving rise to appearances of true existence. They can arise only while the mind is giving rise to an appearance of an absolute absence of the appearance of true existence. In other words, they can appear only during total absorption on voidness, either conceptual or nonconceptual, so long as the energy-winds have been made to enter the central channel. Thus, devoid-forms are extremely special bases for voidness since they can appear simultaneously with cognition of their voidness.

The fact that we meditate with devoid-forms, as the cause for achieving the enlightening body of a Buddha, only during total absorption on voidness explains why Kalachakra does not entail practices analogous to bardo. We achieve bardo only when the grosser energy-winds that make appearances of true existence arise again after the experience of the clear-light

awareness of death. The bardo-body we then manifest is made of those grosser energy-winds. Since devoid-forms are not made of the grosser energy-winds that make appearances of true existence, practice with them does not resemble the experience of bardo.

In contrast, before manifesting an actual clear-light nonconceptual cognition of voidness, we can meditate with illusory bodies, as the cause for achieving an enlightening body, only during subsequent realization of voidness. This is because such bodies are made from the grosser energy-winds that make appearances of true existence, and such appearances arise during subsequent realization of voidness, as they do while experiencing bardo. Therefore, general anuttarayoga has practices that are analogous with bardo.

#### **(4) Special Level of Mental Activity**

In general anuttarayoga, when clear-light mental activity is made inseparable from a blissful nonconceptual cognition of voidness, the physical basis that allows this attainment is the grosser energy-winds being made to enter, abide, and completely dissolve in the central channel. This remains the case only during total absorption on voidness. Until the attainment of enlightenment, the grosser energy-winds manifest once more during subsequent realization of voidness or during meditation on something else. At such times, we no longer experience blissful clear-light awareness of voidness. Because the physical basis for the blissful clear-light awareness of voidness is only present intermittently, this blissful awareness is called "changing blissful awareness" (' *gyur-ba'i bde-ba*).

In Kalachakra, the physical basis that allows clear-light mental activity to be inseparable from an unchanging blissful nonconceptual cognition of voidness is the subtle creative energy-drops stacked in the central channel. As is the case with changing blissful clear-light awareness of voidness, unchanging blissful clear-light awareness of voidness also

1. ceases during subsequent attainment cognition of voidness and during meditation on something else, and
2. functions as a nonstatic phenomenon, undergoing moment-to-moment change for the duration of its existence and producing effects.

Nevertheless, here, the physical bases for the unchanging awareness remain stacked in the central channel "unchangingly," until the total dissolution, forever, of all grosser levels of body. This final dissolution occurs with the attainment of the enlightening body of a Buddha.

The level of mental activity used in Kalachakra and in general anuttarayoga tantra is the same, namely clear-light awareness. Nevertheless, because Kalachakra practice makes that level an unchanging blissful awareness of voidness, rather than a changing blissful awareness of voidness, clear-light awareness of voidness in Kalachakra is more stable than that achieved in general anuttarayoga.

#### **Non-Gelug Variations Concerning Kalachakra**

The non-Gelug traditions explain the closer analogies, closer union of method and wisdom, and special level of mental activity in Kalachakra much as Gelug does. Some slight differences appear, however, in their explanation of devoid-forms as the special bases for voidness. The source of the discrepancy lies in different assertions concerning the subtle energy-winds that make appearances.

Gelug asserts that the subtle appearance-making energy-winds make appearances only of true existence, both in conceptual and nonconceptual cognition. Non-Gelug asserts that they make appearances of truly existent "this"s and "that"s during conceptual cognition only. In sensory and mental nonconceptual cognitions, they make appearances of not truly existent "this"s and "that"s. Both types, however, are unpurified appearances. Devoid forms, as purified appearances, are beyond them both. They are the voidness with aspect that appears inseparably with voidness without aspect during deep awareness of nondenumerable deepest truth.

The rest of the explanation of this point - for instance, concerning unpurified illusory bodies appearing only during the subsequent attainment phase of conceptual cognition of voidness - is the same as Gelug.

### **Conclusion**

We may practice tantra successfully without understanding how it works and why it brings enlightenment more quickly than does sutra. Nevertheless, a clear understanding of general tantra, general anuttarayoga, and Kalachakra theory helps us to develop unshakable confidence and sincere respect for their special methods. Coupled with the confidence, respect, and inspiration we gain from healthy relationships with our tantric masters, our tantra practices becomes even more stable for bringing their intended results - our abilities to be of best help to all others, with our attainments of enlightenment.

# Links

- { 1 } [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/tantra/level1\\_getting\\_started/basic\\_features\\_tantra.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/tantra/level1_getting_started/basic_features_tantra.html)
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