

## **His Holiness the Dalai Lama in New York, 24 September 2005 - Afternoon session: the commentary**

Following this morning's Avalokiteshvara initiation ceremony, in this afternoon's session we're going to the sadhana practice of this deity according to the action class of tantra.

First, however, I'd like to give a brief introduction to the short lam-rim text, Lama Tsongkhapa's The three Principal Aspects of the Path.

The three principal aspects of the path are true renunciation, the awakening mind, bodhicitta, and perfect understanding of emptiness; their importance has to be understood in terms of the true meaning of Dharma in the context of Buddhism.

When we speak of Dharma here we're referring to nirvana, liberation from cyclic existence, or perfect goodness. Therefore, in order to enter the Buddhist path, we first need to cultivate true renunciation and this can arise only on the basis of a deep understanding of the nature of suffering—not just the obvious, manifest sufferings we experience but also the suffering of change and particularly the suffering of pervasive conditioning.

However, this wish alone is not enough for us to attain full enlightenment. To become enlightened we have to generate the altruistic aspiration to attain buddhahood, bodhicitta; simply aspiring to attain liberation for our own sake is not enough for us to accumulate the great merit we need for enlightenment. Only by being motivated by the awakening mind to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings can we accumulate the great store of merit required because the object of this mind, all sentient beings, is infinite—aspiring for the wellbeing of all sentient beings generates vast merit.

Furthermore, the courage of a practice aimed at benefiting all sentient beings is infinite and is similarly very powerful in accumulating the great stores of merit necessary for the attainment of buddhahood. Therefore, the second principal aspect of the path is the awakening mind, bodhicitta.

Finally, even to attain liberation from samsara, the wisdom realizing emptiness is essential because it is only this wisdom that is a direct antidote to the afflictions. Moreover, when complemented by bodhicitta, the wisdom realizing emptiness also has the capacity to eliminate

the subtle obscurations to omniscience. Therefore the third principal aspect of the path is the perfect view of emptiness.

### The Vajrayana

There are different ways of identifying the various classes of Vajrayana. For example, the Vajra Tent Tantra mentions four classes of tantra: action, performance, yoga and highest yoga. Other tantras offer different classifications. But at the heart of them all is the notion of the indivisibility of method and wisdom.

Generally speaking, in all Mahayana teachings the union of method and wisdom is the essence of the path. Even the Perfection Vehicle, the Sutrayana, has the union of method and wisdom, where method refers to practices such as bodhicitta and the six perfections and wisdom refers to the wisdom realizing emptiness. In sutra, the union of these two is understood in terms of one reinforcing or complementing the other. In tantra, the distinguishing feature of the union of method and wisdom is indivisibility.

So what is it that makes this indivisibility possible in tantra? It's possible because of deity yoga practice, where we first meditate on and dissolve everything into emptiness. Then, from within emptiness, we visualize that the very mind that realizes emptiness arises in the form of the meditation deity, and take that enlightened being as the focus of our meditation and reflect upon its emptiness.

Because the basis of emptiness that we meditate upon here is not an ordinary object, like an ordinary person, but rather an enlightened being—the meditation deity—it is therefore a unique, special object and because of that has a much more enduring quality. So when we realize the emptiness of that enlightened deity we have the perfect indivisible union of method and wisdom within a single cognitive event; our visualization of the deity is the method aspect of the path and, within that same mental event, our apprehension, or cognition, of the emptiness of that deity is the wisdom aspect. So both method and wisdom are indivisibly present in a single mental event. This is what makes indivisibility possible in tantra.

Although some practitioners of action tantra simply visualize the deity in front of themselves, there are also practitioners of action tantra who generate themselves as the deity and cultivate or experience this indivisible union.

In the practice of action tantra, external rituals and the conduct of the practitioner are also very important, therefore the texts emphasize personal cleanliness, diet and certain other lifestyle observations and so forth.

### The preliminary practices

In the supplication to the lineage gurus, verse 11 reads,  
I supplicate the ocean of different emanations of the Supreme Arya,  
Universally appearing as environments and inhabitants,  
Apparitions of analytic wisdom and compassion,  
Unified with an all-pervading nature, primordially pure.

This refers to the understanding of emptiness I mentioned earlier, but here emptiness is described in terms of two primary characteristics: all-pervading nature and primordial purity. All-pervading suggests that emptiness is not the reality of just some phenomena but rather is all-encompassing; it pervades all phenomena. Therefore it is not a partial negation of some postulated entities.

Similarly, emptiness is primordially pure because it relates to the emptiness of inherent existence of all phenomena, and this invokes a passage in a text, where Maitreya says that there is nothing to be cleared or dispelled and there is nothing to be posited or postulated, and one must develop the view that is the perfect reality as it is.

So the suggestion here is that the experience of emptiness does not negate something that existed before, that is somehow mentally constructed, or that the perfect nature of reality is not something that has been newly placed upon phenomena. Rather, the understanding of perfect reality, or emptiness, is a case of truly recognizing the true nature of things as they are.

This ultimate nature of reality, dharmata, can be understood in terms of either the Yogachara teaching as found in the Samdhinirmochana Sutra or the Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness according to the second turning of the wheel, the perfection wisdom.

If we understand the suchness or ultimate nature of reality in terms of the Yogachara interpretation, this understanding of reality takes the form of the non-duality of subject and object, where the objective existence of external world is negated; if we examine this understanding carefully we'll see how it can be powerful in overcoming our strong afflictions, such as grasping at and clinging to external objects. When we recognize the external world as a projection or extension of our own mind, our grasping at and clinging to the objective reality of the external world automatically diminishes.

However, the Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness in terms of absence of inherent existence is more profound and more comprehensive, because when we understand emptiness that way there's no scope left for grasping. While [the Yogachara understanding of] the non-duality of subject and object may negate the objectivity of the external world, it still leaves room for grasping at the internal experience of feelings, sensations, mental states and so forth. On the other hand, when we realize emptiness in terms of emptiness of inherent existence, there's no scope at all for grasping at either the external world or the internal world of

experience. Therefore the Tibetan tradition recognizes the Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness as the most profound.

So this stanza basically summarizes the essence of the practice of a Vajrayana sadhana: Apparitions of analytic wisdom and compassion, Unified with an all-pervading nature, primordially pure.

The meaning of union here is that of all-pervading, primordially pure nature with wisdom, the union of subject and object. The subject is the wisdom dharmakaya; the object is the all-pervading, primordially pure emptiness, suchness, or dharmata; and the expression of this unification into a single experience is the Buddha's compassion.

We find similar ideas—compassion as the natural expression of the clear light mind—in the Vajrayana rituals of the Nyingma school, the early translation texts. The idea conveyed here is the same. The buddha's form body, particularly the sambhogakaya, the buddha body of perfect resources, is the compassionate expression of the union of wisdom and its object, emptiness. This compassionate expression takes a physical embodiment, the sambhogakaya. Furthermore, it can manifest as the entire assembly of all the deities of the mandala. Thus we read,

I supplicate the ocean of different emanations of the Supreme Arya,  
Universally appearing as environments and inhabitants.

We understand from this stanza that Avalokiteshvara, the resultant state to which we aspire, is in fact the embodiment of the four buddha kayas because his primordially pure nature is the natural dharmakaya, the wisdom that is unified with that is the wisdom dharmakaya, the compassionate expression of this union in a physical embodiment is the sambhogakaya, and this then manifests as the entire assembly of the mandala.

Since the goal to which we aspire is the embodiment of the four buddha bodies—the two dharmakayas and two rupakayas—the path that leads to the attainment of this resultant state must have characteristics that resemble or correspond to this resultant state.

Then, in verse 14 we read,

Please bless me to eliminate ordinary appearance and grasping  
With the clear appearance and divine pride of the six deities

So from this point on the actual heart of the sadhana practice according to action tantra is explained.

Basically, the heart of action tantra sadhana practice consists of two main practices, the yoga with signs and the yoga without signs, and this differentiation of the presence or absence of

signs is not based on whether or not there is a realization of emptiness but on the way that emptiness is experienced.

The principal practice in the first section, the yoga with signs, involves generating the deity through six stages; the principal practice in the second part, the yoga without signs, involves cultivating the wisdom realizing emptiness based upon the union of shamatha, tranquil abiding, and vipashyana, penetrative insight. Thus the yoga with signs is the main practice for attaining the buddha's form body, rupakaya, and the yoga without signs is the main practice for attaining the buddha's body of perfect reality, dharmakaya

So verse 14 deals with the yoga with signs, verse 15 with the four-branched yoga, which includes mantra repetition and so forth, and verse 16 with the yoga without signs.

## The Actual Practice

As I mentioned before, the heart of action tantra deity yoga meditation is explained in six stages referred to as the six deities and begins with meditation on emptiness—a clear indication that an understanding of emptiness is indispensable in Vajrayana practice.

### 1. The Ultimate Deity

Here we read, “Contemplating as follows is the ultimate deity,” which is followed by the mantra om svabhava shuddah sarva dharma svabhava shuddho ham.

We use Sanskrit here partly to receive inspiration and the blessings of the mantra but it also captures the meditation on emptiness. However, let me explain its meaning.

The om at the beginning of the mantra stands for the unity of the person, the practitioner, who is basically a combination of body, speech and mind. In general, when the thought “I am” arises, its basis is the aggregation of body, speech and mind. Now, as we find in the Heart Sutra, just as the self is devoid of inherent existence, so too are the five aggregates upon which the person is designated devoid of inherent existence. I was once told that the particle “too” is not found in the Chinese version of the Heart Sutra but it is in the Tibetan version: the aggregates too are devoid of inherent existence. What this suggests is that not only is the person designated upon the aggregates, not only is the person empty of inherent existence, even the basis upon which the label “person” is constructed, the five aggregates, is devoid of inherent existence. So the om here stands for the identity and existence of the person.

Svabhava means its nature, and shuddah means naturally pure; this naturally pure nature of person stands for the emptiness of the person.

Then we see sarva dharma, which means all phenomena. Here it refers in particular to the physical and mental aggregates upon which the concept of person is constructed and includes all phenomena in both samsara and nirvana. Again, svabhava means their nature and shuddho their purity, while ham connotes the need to place our mind single-pointedly upon the realization of emptiness of both person and phenomena.

This fusion of our mind with the emptiness of person and phenomena refers to an experience where all conceptual elaborations have come to an end, have been dissolved, similar to what the Seventh Dalai Lama described in a poem, where he said that just as clouds arise and dissolve in the vast expanse of the sky, similarly, when the subject—the mind—and the object—dharmata, ultimate reality, fuse, within that experience, all duality and conceptual elaborations dissolve.

The text continues, “The nature of myself, the deity to be meditated upon, and all phenomena are in essence of one taste of emptiness.”

“One taste of emptiness” refers to the dissolution of the dualistic perceptions of all phenomena. What this suggests is that just as the meditator is devoid of inherent existence, so too is the object of meditation, Avalokiteshvara. It is said that, as far as buddha nature is concerned, there is no difference between a sentient being and an enlightened buddha, so here similarly, as far as emptiness is concerned, there is no difference between the meditator and the object of meditation. In this way we meditate upon the emptiness of all phenomena but particularly upon the emptiness of our own self.

## 2. The Deity of Sound

Here the text reads, “From the sphere of emptiness, the aspect of the tone of the mantra, om mani padme hum, resounds, pervading the realm of space.”

This refers to the second stage of the deity yoga meditation, where out of our experience of emptiness there arises not letters but a sound, which we can call the resonance of emptiness. So this sound, om mani padme hum, resounds from within the state of emptiness.

## 3. The Deity of Syllables

The third stage of the deity yoga meditation is the deity of letters, or syllables, and here we read, “My mind, in the aspect...grains of gold.”

## 4. The Deity of Form

Next is the deity of form, where we read, “The (syllables) transform into...and other realms.” This describes the fulfillment of the two purposes, making offerings to the enlightened beings, such as Avalokiteshvara, and bringing about the welfare of other sentient beings.

As I explained before, sadhana practice should be based on meditation on bodhicitta and emptiness. So at this point, when we emanate light rays and make offerings to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, we can offer our own spiritual practice, which is the highest of offerings, and if we have actually done some meditation on bodhicitta and emptiness, then we have something to offer that will really please the buddhas and bodhisattvas and gain their approval.

Similarly, although at this point we may not have had a genuine experience of bodhicitta or attained buddhahood and are therefore not fully able to bring about the welfare of other sentient beings, at least at the level of imagination we can mimic the activities of the buddha in bringing about others’ welfare. Therefore, if our sadhana practice is grounded on meditation on bodhicitta and emptiness, when we read this section of the sadhana and reflect upon fulfilling the two purposes, there is some substantive meaning to that meditation. If, on the other hand, our practice is not properly grounded, it will simply remain on the level of mere words

## 5. The Deity of Mudra

On the basis of fulfilling the two purposes of making offerings to the buddhas and bringing about others’ welfare, we now arise in the full form of Avalokiteshvara with one thousand arms and so forth, as described in the sadhana.

## 6. The Deity of Sign

This involves first, invoking and absorbing the wisdom beings; then, invoking and making offerings to the five buddha families; and finally, requesting the empowerment. Then the empowering deities dissolve into us, crowning our head with the lord of the buddha family.

Now let’s take another look at supplication verse 14, which mentions these six deities:

Please bless me to eliminate ordinary appearance and grasping,  
With the clear appearance and divine pride of the six deities:

The deity of thusness, the tone of the mantra’s empty resonance, the seed syllable,  
The form complete with marks and exemplifications, the commitment mudra and sign.

Having identified the six stages of the deity yoga meditation, we see the purpose of engaging in such meditation: to overcome ordinary perceptions and apprehensions, which is done by deliberately cultivating the visualization of oneself as a deity. The clearer we cultivate this

visualization, the more stable is the perception of oneself as an enlightened being. When the stable perception of oneself as the deity arises and on the basis of that the thought “I am” arises, the focus of that thought is not the afflicted ordinary person but rather the new identity that we have cultivated of oneself as a deity. Thus in place of ordinary perception we cultivate divine perception and in place of ordinary identity and apprehension, we cultivate the divine identity of the deity and divine apprehension of all phenomena.

If we are able to maintain as the foundation of our practice both bodhicitta and a deep understanding of emptiness and on that basis constantly engage in the deity yoga meditation of cultivating the divine perception and the enlightened identity of oneself as a deity and gain deep realization of that, then, as Lama Tsongkhapa says, all our activities—physical, verbal or mental—are transformed such that we accumulate great stores of merit.

This is very true. The key practice of deity yoga meditation is cultivation of divine perception and identity, and this is to be maintained not only during the meditation session but also in between sessions as well. If we can do that, then every activity of our body, speech and mind will become a factor in our accumulating vast stores of merit. This shows the unique and distinctive qualities of the Vajrayana approach.

Then, as we read in supplication verse 15, the main practice of cultivation of divine identity and perception is followed by subsidiary practices:

Please bless me to accomplish each and every common attainment  
Through dependence on the concentration with four-branched repetition.

The four-branched repetition means the practices associated with repetition of the mantra: sound, the mental state that accompanies recitation of the mantra, the basis of self, and the basis in relation to others. In other words, the four-branched repetition refers to the sadhana practice, which involves visualization of the deity in front of us, the front-generation; visualization of oneself as a deity, the self generation; visualization of a moon disk and so forth at our heart; and visualization of a mantra on that moon disk. These four practices are the four-branched repetition.

The last two lines of this verse read,  
And to complete perfect concentration  
With the yogas of absorption in fire and sound.

“Yogas of absorption in fire and sound” refers to the unique approach of action tantra where we cultivate tranquil abiding on the basis of deity yoga meditation, which also enables us to accumulate great stores of merit very quickly.



The next stanza concerns the union of tranquil abiding and penetrative insight based on deity yoga:

Please bless me to uproot the two obscurations  
With the great space-like concentration  
Bestowing immaculate liberation that destroys all trust in grasping at signs  
And by being endowed with a myriad of merits of skillful means.

In the context of deity yoga, the union of tranquil abiding and penetrative insight refers to a total fusion of our mind with emptiness.

So, with this, I have explained the heart of the sadhana's deity yoga practice. With respect to the actual meditation, each session begins with instantaneous dissolution into emptiness, which serves to remind us that every moment of the Vajrayana practitioner's day to day life has to be permeated by the deity yoga practice of viewing everything in the light of divine appearance and identity—clear appearance of oneself as the deity and strong conviction that this is who we are.

The first thing we have to do when we get up in the morning is to remind ourselves to cultivate enlightened appearance and apprehension and dissolve everything into emptiness. Then, from within this emptiness, we arise as the deity. The sadhana practice also involves first dissolving the materials we're going to offer into emptiness, regenerating them from within emptiness, and then consecrating and blessing them before making the offering because, as beginners, our attachment to ordinary objects is very strong. Therefore we need to go through this process first.

As to the materials we offer in the sadhanas—water for drinking, water for washing the feet, flowers, incense and so forth—these are probably based on the cultural traditions of India at the time. So, dissolve the offerings into emptiness, regenerate them from within emptiness, bless and then offer them.

Offering is followed by praise.

The actual meditation is what I explained before, the cultivation of the divine perception and identity, but, as many sadhana manuals state, when having done this for a while we get tired, we should engage in the repetition of the mantra.

Normally when we do retreats we tend to emphasize mantra repetition and ignore the key practice, the heart meditations of deity yoga. When this is the case, our only option when we get tired is to end the session.

In summary, then, we do the main practice on the mental level of meditation. When this makes us tired we shift to the verbal level and recite the mantra. When we get tired of mantra repetition we end the session and engage in physical activity such as walking around and so forth. And when we get to the point where even this makes us tired, we go to sleep!

### Mantra recitation

If you look at the sadhana you'll see that first there's the long Avalokiteshvara mantra, namo ratna trayaya namah arya jnana sagara...and so on, all the way to the end, citi jvalam apanaye svaha.

The second part of this, tadyatha om dhara dhara dhiri dhiri dhuru dhuru...svaha is considered the short version of the long one and normally when we do Avalokiteshvara retreat, we recite this one 10,000 times.

However, if we retreat on the basis of the six-syllable mantra, om mani padme hum, we do 100,000 repetitions for each syllable, that is 600,000 times.

### The Concluding Practice

The first section, the request to reside or depart, is not necessary when we practice the sadhana daily and generate ourself as the deity, but if we do the practice on the basis of a front generation, where we visualize the deity in front of us, we need to include this section.

So when we're doing the sadhana daily with self-generation, we skip to "I transform into the Great Compassionate One, with one face and two arms, marked by a white om on the crown, a red ah at the throat and a blue hum at the heart" and conclude the sadhana there. Then we do the dedication.

Dedicating our merit at the end of practice is crucial because, in general, it's very rare for us create merit, so we have to ensure that when we do, it doesn't get wasted. We do this by dedicating the virtue we have accumulated not to the fulfillment of our mundane aspirations or the welfare of this life but to the benefit of all sentient beings as infinite as space, following Shantideva sentiments, when he wrote,

As long as space remains,  
As long as sentient beings,  
Until then may I too remain  
And dispel the miseries of the world.

It is important to dedicate our merit in this manner and to reinforce or complement it by remembering emptiness as well.

In between sessions

So far we've discussed the practice of the sadhana and deity yoga during the meditation session, but as I mentioned before, we need to practice in between sessions as well, and there are yogas associated with all our everyday activities such as getting up in the morning, blessing the speech, eating, sleeping and so forth. Practicing like this between sessions enhances our sessions of sadhana practice. Thus we can transform all twenty-four hours of our existence into practice and obviously speed our path to enlightenment.

So with this, today's teaching is completed. As Buddhists we are all familiar with ritual practices but the most important thing to remember is that actual Dharma practice is not done by means of ritual but by the mind and the essence of such practice is to cultivate the awakening mind, bodhicitta, and an understanding of emptiness. These two are the essence of Dharma.

Thank you very much.