



# Tantra comes from the Buddha

*By Lama Thubten Yeshe*

The first thing I want to say is that Buddhist tantra definitely comes from Shakyamuni Buddha. Before his enlightenment, when he was a tenth-level bodhisattva, the buddhas of the ten directions stirred him from his deep meditative absorption and said, "You've attained the highest bodhisattva level, which is completely free from ego conflict, emotional problems, and anxiety, but to discover the omniscient wisdom and eternal bliss of buddhahood, you have to receive tantric initiation." So they initiated him and he was then able to attain enlightenment.

One of the main tantric techniques enables us to handle pleasure in a positive way, to take pleasure as the path to enlightenment. A powerful king once said to Lord Buddha, "I'm confused as to how best to lead my life. I'm responsible for all the people in my kingdom and surrounded by worldly pleasure – what I need is a teaching to transform what's left of my life into the path to enlightenment." In response, Lord Buddha taught him tantra.<sup>1</sup>

For similar reasons I think that tantra is the right practice for Westerners and of the utmost need in this twentieth century. After all, the Buddha wanted us to have as much perfect pleasure as possible; he certainly didn't want us to be miserable, confused, or dissatisfied. Therefore we should understand that we meditate in order to gain profound pleasure, not to beat ourselves up or to experience pain. If entering the Buddhist path brings you nothing but fear and guilt then it's certainly not worth the effort.

<sup>1</sup> See Introduction to Tantra, Pg. 13

## The human problem

Our problem, our human situation, is that whenever we experience pleasure we get more confused; we react to pleasure by developing emotional confusion, hatred, anxiety, and so forth. In other words, whenever we experience pleasure we lose control. Therefore Lord Buddha's teachings always emphasize gaining control of the mind.

So look within to see what happens when you experience pleasure: Do you get more ignorant or less? Check that out – that's the main question. If whenever you experience worldly pleasure you become more mindful, concentrated, aware, and in touch with reality, that's fine. However, it's more likely that you get further out of touch with reality, more spaced out, and enter an illusory, fantasy world of your own creation.

## The two Mahayana vehicles

To help us deal with these issues, Lord Buddha taught two Mahayana vehicles – Paramitayana, or Sutrayana; and Vajrayana, or Tantrayana or Mantrayana.

So what's the difference between these vehicles? We already practice Paramitayana and the six perfections; we've all heard lam-rim teachings and are trying our best to actualize them – why do we need tantra?

The difference is that Paramitayana does not contain the skillful means for taking sense pleasure as the path to enlightenment, for transforming worldly pleasure into the path to enlightenment. This is the unique quality of tantra.



The difference is not that tantra offers us better or deeper explanations of shunyata, bodhichitta, or renunciation. Those are the same in Paramitayana and Tantrayana. In fact, those three principal aspects of the path – renunciation, bodhichitta, and the wisdom-realizing emptiness – are the fundamental prerequisites for entering the tantric vehicle.

## Renunciation

Renunciation doesn't mean changing the color of our skin, putting on robes, or not wearing make-up. Everybody, each human being, needs renunciation. Does that mean giving something up? Yes, it does – we all have to give up something – but what it is that we have to abandon is an individual decision; each of us has to check up for ourselves what extreme thoughts come into our mind, and once we have determined what they are we should deal with them in an easy-going way. That's the way to renounce ... deal with extreme emotions in an easy-going way.

I don't need to tell you the characteristics of your own emotional disturbances – you know from experience, "When I don't get this or that I get irritated." Thus you can figure out what you need to do in the way of self-correction to be happy. That's what I mean by easy-going with respect to renunciation. Anyway, I'm not going to tell you the details of renunciation, just its nuclear essence.<sup>2</sup> Each of us has to understand our own hypersensitivity and gross emotions, the problems they bring and the way to correct them. That's renunciation.

When Lama Je Tsongkhapa explained renunciation in his lam-rim teachings he went into great detail about ego conflict, its results, and how and why people become dissatisfied, so you can research his extensive explanations for yourself.<sup>3</sup>

If you do, you will see that actually, renunciation is not that simple. From the Buddhist point of view it means learning about yourself by understanding how your ego works within your mind and how it manifests externally in your life situations and friendships. Therefore it takes a lot of wisdom. You don't just say, "Oh, I must renounce," and squeeze yourself. It doesn't work that way. Renunciation and meditation go together.

## Bodhichitta

Bodhichitta means opening your heart to others as much as you can. Normally we do open our heart to others to some extent – everybody does – but here we're talking about doing

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it with the highest destination in mind: the transcendent, universal aim of complete enlightenment. That's the way we create space in our heart. So it's very important.

We can see from our normal human relationships that when we're uptight and closed to each other it's extremely difficult to get along, but when we open up and aim to achieve something more profound it's much easier. If I'm in a relationship with you only for chocolate, when I don't get my chocolate, I'm going to get upset, aren't I? From the Buddhist point of view, human beings are much more profound than that; we can achieve tremendous things. So bodhichitta is very important.

We think it's important to become a great meditator but that's very difficult to accomplish in this revolutionary modern world. These days it's much more practical to open our heart to each other and make that our Dharma path.

Still, it's a lot easier to say the words than to actually practice bodhichitta. Realizing bodhichitta is a process that requires continuous action and steady application rather than the occasional sporadic effort. The mind of bodhichitta no longer sees any objects of hatred or neurotic desire anywhere in the world and it obviously takes time to achieve the kind of equilibrium with all universal living beings that forms the basis of such a view. However, Buddhism is extremely practical and far-reaching and teaches an organic, gradual approach by which anybody can become truly healthy, completely free from any problem, by developing the universal thought of enlightenment.

Sometimes I ask my Western friends, "Do you have any enemies?" and they often reply that they do not; not one object of hatred. I say, "Really?" I don't believe them; I'm very skeptical. So then I ask, "Do you have any objects of desire; anything with which you're emotionally obsessed?" To that

<sup>2</sup> See Introduction to Tantra, Chapter 5, for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>3</sup> See The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment.



they usually reply, "Yes," to which I go, "Ah-ha!"

I respond like that because my studies of Buddhist psychology have taught me that if you have an object of grasping, emotional obsession you instinctively have objects of hatred; the mind of hatred is automatically there, waiting to react.

What do you think about that? Is my understanding polluted, wrong? What's the Western point of view? The Western mind is kind of radical ... you're easy going; you think you don't have any enemies, but in fact you do. It's simply a matter of being aware. But we're usually not aware of what's in our mind.

From the Buddhist point of view, the healthy mind is one that is free of all objects of irritation – organic, inorganic, philosophy, ideology ... anything. As long as your mind contains even one idea that makes you uneasy, you're neither free nor healthy.

Look at any big Western city these days. How many religious or psychotherapeutic groups are there? Do they all get along with each other or not? What about your own mind? Are you able to accept the trips that other people around you are on as necessary according to their individual needs and simply let them be? Does something as simple as the noise of an airplane flying overhead upset you? Why? It comes; it goes. Don't get irritated; just let go. Airplanes are also individuals' need. If small things like that bother you, again, from the Buddhist point of view you're not mentally healthy.

Well, we can find many good examples of annoyance in twentieth century life. What about uranium enrichment, nuclear power stations, or the recently announced neutron bomb<sup>4</sup>? Does your ego hurt when you hear the government announce such things? Do you react? Do you cry? There's no reason to react like that. It doesn't help. You're just making yourself emotionally sick, needlessly tiring yourself out. It's useless; we all know that.

Who knows? Perhaps President Reagan is a manifestation of Shakyamuni Buddha or Jesus Christ. I'm not lying. Intuitively, I can't say he's evil, so I can't say he's not buddha. It's not my business, either. You never know. I heard him explain the reality of the neutron bomb, how it destroys organic life and leaves all the precious inorganic resources intact. That's fantastic. Maybe it's a good thing. Perhaps this is another way

of explaining the reality of Dharma, his way of explaining love. Perhaps human beings can learn love through this.

Sometimes the only way people can learn is through being shocked; if we don't get shocked we don't learn but remain comfortably in the dark shadow of ignorance. I believe that when we get a shock we learn; that that's the way to bring comprehension. Perhaps when people hear about the neutron bomb they'll develop detachment from their worldly possessions, thinking, "This bomb makes the entire future completely insecure. I might as well enjoy my wealth as much as possible because in a couple of months all my friends and I might have completely disappeared." Thus many people might develop detachment – how fantastic!

I often think that people don't pay attention when we explain the Buddhadharma because they're not shocked. They're kind of, "Oh, yeah ... maybe yes, maybe no ...." But when they hear about the bomb they think, "That's true. I'd better go to Hawaii for a holiday and have at least one week's good time. After that, whatever happens, happens."

Since entering the monastery as a six-year-old I've heard about impermanence – how things are constantly changing, changing, changing – hundreds of times. But now, looking at this twentieth century world and seeing how quickly things change and react, I see impermanence more clear than I ever did and it really comes home to me how the Buddha was right. So that's unbelievably great. It's so clear.

Goodness! It seems that my teaching today has been mainly about the neutron bomb ... you probably think I'm a complete disaster!

Well, this twentieth century life has advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that we can get together and talk. If it weren't the twentieth century we wouldn't be here like this.

## The wisdom of emptiness

The third principal aspect of the path is the wisdom of shunyata. In order to completely obliterate the root of human suffering we need to understand non-duality. Love, compassion, bodhichitta and other positive attitudes serve as temporary solutions to problems such as anxiety and the uncontrolled mind, but they don't completely eradicate them; only the shunyata experience can do that. ☸

<sup>4</sup> The neutron bomb, which no longer exists, was a small thermonuclear weapon designed to harm mainly biological tissue. President Carter cancelled its development but President Reagan restarted it in 1981, around the time of this teaching.

*Lama continues his explanation in more detail in Universal Love: The Yoga Method of Buddha Maitreya, a new book from the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive. This excerpt reprinted with permission. Go to [www.LamaYeshe.com](http://www.LamaYeshe.com)*