



Embarking on the Tantric Path and Examining One's Progress

H.H. the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche



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Introduction

In this teaching, I will explain how an ordinary person enters the tantric path and how to know whether one is making progress on the path.

Every sentient being has buddha nature, the potential to become a buddha. By analogy, every seed or grain that is sown has the potential to grow into good crops. But to grow into crops, a seed must meet certain conditions like a fertile ground, right moisture, right temperature, right fertilizer, and the right amount of water. If a seed meets all these conditions, then definitely it will grow into good crops. Just having a good seed, however, does not mean it will grow into good crops. Rather, a good seed must meet all the right conditions to grow into good crops. Similarly, all sentient beings are like sown seeds; we all have buddha nature. But just having buddha nature does not mean that we will all become a buddha.

We have buddha nature because we all have the ālaya

consciousness (Skt. ālayavijñāna). Our ālaya consciousness is none other than our buddha nature. In other words, our buddha nature is not separate from our ālaya consciousness. Therefore, every being has buddha nature because every being has the ālaya consciousness. The nature of the ālaya consciousness is pure since beginningless time; its nature is not stained with obscurations. Rather, all our obscurations—such as our emotional defilements—are temporary or adventitious. They can be purified if we adopt the right remedy or antidote.

Because we all have buddha nature, everybody and anybody can enter the Vajrayāna path—irrespective of differences like race or nationality. Each of us has the chance to practice Dharma, which is the path or method to attain buddhahood. There are two ways to enter the Vajrayāna: the gradual path and the direct path. On the gradual path, a student begins by going for refuge to the Triple Gem and learning and practicing the Dharma similar to a follower of the Hīnayāna. Then, one enters the Pāramitāyāna. And then, one enters the Vajrayāna gradually. On the direct path, a non-Buddhist enters the Vajrayāna directly through empowerment and becomes a Buddhist on this path without first gradually practicing the Hīnayāna and Pāramitāyāna.

What is the meaning of the Vajrayāna? Generally, the Vajrayāna can be understood as the path or method that enables us to attain the level of Buddha Vajradhara, which is the ultimate state or result.

In this context, vajra refers to the Buddha's body, speech, and wisdom (Skt. *kāyavajra*, *vākvajra*, and *cittavajra*). In English, I prefer not to say body, speech, and mind when referring to the Buddha, because the Buddha does not have a mind. Rather, the Buddha has wisdom. Our mind ceases and becomes wisdom when we become a buddha. The Tibetan term *sem* (སེམས་) connotes a mind. Moreover, the *ālaya* consciousness is not *sem* or the mind. According to the Buddhist teachings, there are eight consciousnesses: the first five are our sense consciousnesses, the sixth is the mind consciousness, the seventh consists of our afflictions or defilements, and the eighth is the *ālaya* consciousness. Although the mind and the *ālaya* are both consciousnesses, they are not exactly the same. So, the term *vajra* in *Vajrayāna* refers to the Buddha's body, speech, and wisdom; it means the ultimate result, which is none other than buddhahood or the level of Buddha *Vajradhara*.



Yāna is usually translated as vehicle, but it also means the path and the result. First, yāna is the path or method to attain buddhahood. In the Vajrayāna, the guru introduces to us that our body, speech, and mind are none other than the Buddha's body, speech, and wisdom. Our body, speech, and mind and the Buddha's body, speech, and wisdom are based on the same stream or continuum—the ālaya consciousness. Thus, the guru introduces to us that our true nature is the same as the Buddha's nature. Once this is introduced to us, it will gradually become clearer to us that our body, speech, and mind are none other than the Buddha's body, speech, and wisdom. Second, yāna is the result itself. Through the Vajrayāna, one reaches the level of Buddha Vajradhara, the ultimate result.

In short, the Vajrayāna is both the path to attain buddhahood and the result itself, which is inseparable from the Vajrayāna path.

Choosing the Guru

In the Vajrayāna, it is very important to choose the right guru. First, a potential student must check or examine a potential guru. After checking or examining a potential guru, then we can accept someone as our own guru and start receiving empowerments and teachings. Before someone buy a car, they will check or examine very carefully before deciding which car to buy, even though the car might last only ten or fifteen years. Choosing a guru is much deeper than choosing a car. One is choosing a guru not only for ten or fifteen years and not only for the remainder of this life. Rather, one is choosing a guru who will remain as one's object of refuge and protector for many lives to come—for life after life. Hence, we must be very careful before receiving empowerments.

Once we receive authentic empowerments from a guru, we should not later criticize that guru. Rather, we should always remain respectful and appreciate the Dharma teachings we have received from that guru. Whatever negativity is perceived,

we must think that it is due to our impure vision rather than the guru's fault. Because of our own impure vision, we see this and that fault of the guru. In reality, the guru is Buddha Vajradhara. Thus, we should not perceive faults in the guru.



Embarking on the Tantric Path

When deciding our spiritual path, we should be guided by our own wishes or free will in whatever we do. No one should force us to practice Dharma or adopt any path. If forced, we cannot properly enter the path. And if we force others regardless of their wishes, then they will not enter the path genuinely. To enter the Buddhist path in general or the Vajrayāna in particular, a person must decide based on their own wish. We may try to lead, influence, or guide others to have the wish to enter the path. But the wish should come from their own mind.

Actually, every Dharma practice is mainly a mental practice, not just a physical or verbal practice. Dharma practice is not merely ceremonial but should come from the mind. Dharma practice is a path or method that can really subdue our wild or untamed mind. To do this, we must have focus, we must have concentration, we must use the right visualizations, and so on; all of these are practiced through our mind. Our body and speech

cannot do concentration and visualization for us. Without proper concentration and visualization, we cannot tame our mind.

As described, one must have the wish to enter the Vajrayāna and only then should one enter the path. To enter the Vajrayāna, one must have received refuge and bodhicitta vows; then, one can receive the Mantrayāna vow. At the moment one receives the Mantrayāna vow for the first time, that is when one enters the Vajrayāna. All Vajrayāna practitioners hold the three vows: the prātimokṣa, bodhicitta, and Mantrayāna vows. Among the prātimokṣa vows, there are different types—such as the vows of a layperson or the vows of a celibate monastic, the latter of which are further classified into the vows of a novice and fully ordained monastic. But, one must have received at least the refuge vow, which is part of the prātimokṣa vows. The refuge vow is the base of all the vows.

The refuge vow can be received according to the Hīnayāna, Pāramitāyāna, or Vajrayāna tradition. For those who enter the Vajrayāna directly, they receive the refuge vow according to the Vajrayāna tradition. The cause of refuge has three types—fear, faith, and compassion. There are three types of fear. The first is the fear of experiencing the suffering of saṃsāra, which is common to all Buddhist schools, including the Hīnayāna. The second is the fear of having self-cherishing thoughts, which is the Mahāyāna's uncommon cause of refuge. The third is the fear of having ordinary or impure vision, which is the Vajrayāna's uncommon cause of refuge. These are some differences in the causes of refuge.

In all Buddhist traditions, we go for refuge to the Triple Gem—the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. But in the Vajrayāna, we include the guru as well in our refuge. The guru is none other than and inseparable from the Triple Gem. In the Vajrayāna, although there are four different aspects of refuge—the guru and Triple Gem—these are not four different identities. Also in the Vajrayāna, the Buddha is not visualized in the form of Buddha Shakyamuni, but rather in the form of Buddha Vajradhara, Hevajra, or other deities.

The Vajrayāna is based on the Pāramitāyāna. Refuge is the basis of the bodhicitta vow, and the bodhicitta vow is the basis of the Mantrayāna vow. Without the refuge vow, one cannot receive the bodhicitta vow. And without the refuge and the bodhicitta vows, one cannot receive the Mantrayāna vow. Nowadays, when people refer to the Mahāyāna, they usually mean the Pāramitāyāna. But the Vajrayāna is part of the Mahāyāna. Mahāyāna is an umbrella term that encompasses both the Pāramitāyāna and the Vajrayāna. All Mahāyāna practice must be done with bodhicitta. Without bodhicitta, there is no Mahāyāna path or practice. Hence, it is very important to receive the bodhicitta vow before receiving the Mantrayāna vow and entering the Vajrayāna.

In summary, with buddha nature as our basis, a person must have the wish and right motivation to enter the Vajrayāna. Only then should that person receive the refuge and bodhicitta vows and then receive the Mantrayāna vow and enter the Vajrayāna.

Examining One's Progress on the Path

On the path itself, we must have the right structure. The general structure of all Dharma practice or any yāna is to have moral conduct as the foundation and then to engage in listening, contemplation, and meditation in the right sequence.

To know whether one is making progress on the path, there are physical and mental signs we can observe. Physically, one's body become lighter. Mentally, one will have a better or clearer visualization. Further, one will have the ability to control more negative thoughts and will be a happier person. One will have less clinging and less attachment to the mundane world and the five sense objects. Khenchen Appey Rinpoche said that there is no fault to say or observe that a Dharma practitioner is sick. But, if a practitioner is unhappy, then this practitioner has not made good progress on the path.

A practitioner who has made good progress on the path will have a more stable mind and will not be affected by exciting or sad news.

Their mind remains calm and stable even in the face of sad news. That is a sign of progress. As ordinary human beings, however, when we hear exciting news, our mind becomes very active. We cannot focus so well on our practice or study. Because our mind is so active, wild, or excited in that moment, we cannot control it; it is not free. Moreover, if a practitioner who has made good progress wins a big lottery, even then their mind will not be very excited; and even if they lost their family members, they will not cry or feel very sad because their mind is stable. They know impermanence; they know the nature of this world. Whether they win money or lose their family members, their mind will remain unaffected by these conditions and circumstances. If our mind is more stable, and if we can control our negative thoughts better than before, then it means we are making progress on the path.

Whether we are making progress does not depend on how many years we have been studying or receiving teachings. It depends on whether we have control over our mind. After learning the Dharma for many years, if we still have the same amount of negative thoughts, if our negative thoughts are not reduced, or if our positive thoughts have not increased, then it means we have listened but have not applied the teachings into action. That is why we have not improved.

Therefore, we must connect our knowledge and practice, and our practice and experience. Our Dharma knowledge is the

cause of our practice; in other words, our practice is the result of this knowledge. We must make this connection. If we have knowledge but do not apply it or do not practice, then our knowledge has no use. For example, if you know how to cook a dish, but you never actually cook or make food, then this knowledge is pointless.

Gaining knowledge is the first step, but it is not complete. After gaining knowledge about Dharma, then one must practice, which is the second step. And just practicing is not enough either. After practicing, one should have experience. This experience is the real cause that can tame one's mind. Practice without experience will not have a big impact on, and will not tame, our mind. The real antidote to our negative thoughts is wisdom. Wisdom is not simply our practice; mere practice is not wisdom. To have wisdom, one must have experience—inner realization. That inner realization or experience is called wisdom. Without it, we cannot eliminate or pacify our negative thoughts. Therefore, experience is very important. To have experience, we must practice; and to practice, we must have knowledge about how to practice.

All these steps must be based on the right motivation. At times, we might deceive ourselves by thinking that we have made progress on the path since we have met many high gurus or received many teachings. But meeting high gurus or receiving profound teachings does not necessarily mean we are making progress. We can meet high gurus and listen to their teachings,

but if we do not apply their teachings, then we cannot improve or make progress on the path. Actual progress should come from our own experience. Without such experience, we cannot reduce our negative thoughts and increase our positive thoughts. Progress on the path means to reduce negative thoughts and to increase positive thoughts.

In a song about *Parting from the Four Attachments*, Jetsün Drakpa Gyaltsen said that even if someone has kept moral discipline and has listened to, contemplated, and meditated on the teachings, all of these activities are not the seed to attain liberation if that person still has attachment to this life. Instead, these activities may cause us to have more jealousy towards those who are better than us, cause us to feel competition towards those who are equal to us, and cause us to have disrespect towards those who we think are lower than us. With the right motivation as well as moral discipline, knowledge, contemplation, and meditation, we will have genuine practice and the real cause for liberation from the ocean of saṃsāra. Listening to teachings from great gurus is not enough. If we listen to these teachings with the attachment to this life, then it is still not the real way to practice. To check whether we are on the right track and whether we are making progress on the path, we should examine our motivation again and again.

The purpose of all Dharma teachings and practice is to improve our mind and to make us better persons. By taming our mind,

we can become better persons. There are bad people in this world because they did not tame their mind. Because they did not tame and subdue their mind, they become bad people. If one's mind has been tamed, then one will never become a bad person. Rather, one will always be a good person and improve oneself.

A good Vajrayāna practitioner must have a stable and calm mind. Their mind will not be disturbed by excitement or sadness. If we have this level of control over our mind, then naturally we can remove a lot of worries and suffering. In this mundane world, many of us have a lot of worries, suffering, and problems. This is the result of having strong clinging and attachment, which results from having an unstable mind. If we have a stable mind, then we can be much happier, without so much anxiety and worries. For great practitioners, even if their relatives or close family members die, they would not cry or feel very sad because they know everything is impermanent. They do not just say “it is impermanence” but they have truly integrated the meaning of impermanence in their life.

This summarizes how to examine one's progress on the path.

Questions and Answers

Question 1: How should we learn and practice once we are ready to embark on the tantric path?

Answer: To embark and then make progress on the tantric path, a Dharma student must have basic knowledge and a good motivation as the foundation. One should learn the basic Mahāyāna teachings on loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta. Also, one should learn about the general meaning of tantra. Otherwise, there can be misunderstandings about tantra, especially about the appearances of certain deities. To clarify all these doubts, one must know the actual meaning of tantra. Without knowing the meaning, if someone has wrong views or tries to criticize tantra simply based on appearances, then it is not right. One cannot judge by appearance alone. Even in the mundane world, we cannot judge others by their appearance alone. Similarly, we cannot judge tantra by the appearance of certain deities. For example, if a deity is depicted as having a wrathful appearance, one cannot say that this is a wrathful or violent path. Although some deities have wrathful appearances, they are based on non-violence, loving-kindness, compassion,

and bodhicitta for all beings. Without knowing the motivation or the purpose of these wrathful appearances, if someone judges tantra simply by looking at deity images, then this is not the right approach.

So first, one must know the basic teachings and have a general background about the Vajrayāna. And one must have the right guru as one's guide on the Vajrayāna path. This guru is not only for this life but for all future lives until one attains buddhahood. Even after attaining buddhahood, we still respect our guru. In fact, the head of each Buddhist deity is adorned by the owner of the race representing the guru. The owner of the race, adorning the deity's head, is the buddha who presides over the buddha family or race to which the deity belongs.

Question 2: Where can we find a right guru? What can we do if we have chosen a wrong guru?

Answer: Buddhist commentaries provide detailed descriptions about the guru. If a guru has the qualities and characteristics described, then you can accept that person as your guru and request and receive teachings from that guru. If you do not know about these descriptions, then you should make inquiries from others. Also, you should check with others about whether someone is a proper guru or not. It is good to ask questions.

Moreover, whether someone is a right guru does not depend on the person's title; rather, it depends on their qualities. In Tibetan Buddhism, there are many ordinary monks who became great masters or great gurus, such as Khenchen Appey Rinpoche and Khenchen Kunga Wangchuk Rinpoche. Not only in the Sakya school, but in other schools as well, there are many ordinary monks who became great masters. So, whether a person has a high title should not be the basis for our judgment; it is more important to judge someone's qualities before accepting them as our guru.

Regarding what to do if one has chosen a wrong guru: by the term "chosen," I believe it is meant that one has already received empowerments and teachings from the guru. Before receiving any empowerments or teachings, that person will not become your guru. Someone becomes your guru once you have received empowerments or teachings from them. If you have already

received empowerment or teachings from a so-called wrong guru, then you may avoid such guru. But still, you should not criticize or lose faith in a teacher who has otherwise given authentic Dharma teachings. Once you have made an authentic dharmic connection with a teacher and have formed a guru-disciple relationship, one should not criticize the guru.

There are many stories from the past about disciples who saw their gurus performing what appeared to be negative actions. But still, they did not lose their faith; they continued to maintain devotion to their gurus; then later, they gained realization. In ancient times, even when disciples saw their gurus performing negative actions, those disciples still saw their gurus as a real buddha. In modern times, some teachers are indeed wrong or bad gurus, not just by appearance but in reality. If it turns out that one's guru was truly a wrong guru, then you may stop following that guru. But if the guru appears wrong simply on a superficial level, then in reality this guru is not a wrong guru.

Question 3: What does practice mean? Does it mean chanting, meditating, and behaving in accordance with what we have been taught?

Answer: All of these can be considered as practice, but the main practice is mental practice. The main practice is not just physical or verbal practice, but it is the mental practice of Dharma. To undertake genuine practice, first we should have the right motivation, which is developed by the mind. Then, in the middle, we should have the right concentration and visualization during our practice. To do this, we must acquire knowledge; then, we will have the right concentration or visualization, which comes from the mind. At the end of our practice, we should make a proper dedication, which also comes from the mind. Therefore, mental practice is the most important practice of all.

* * *

Question 4: When we receive a permission initiation (Tib. jenang), do we receive and need to keep the three vows?

Answer: During a jenang, one receives the three vows. Normally during any initiation, we recite seven-limb prayer. At that time, you receive refuge vow, the basis of prātimokṣa. And one receives the bodhicitta vow as well. Then, having received a short jenang, one has received some level of Mantrayāna vows. But they are not complete Mantrayāna vows since a jenang is not a major empowerment.

Question 5: Does an initiation have the blessings of the lineage?

Answer: An initiation must come from an unbroken lineage. All authentic initiations can be traced back and have root and lineage gurus. Through a jenang, you can receive the blessings of the unbroken lineage. Whether you receive these blessings, however, depends on your own mind and how you perceive or visualize the guru. If you think that the guru is an ordinary being, then you will receive the blessing of an ordinary being; if you think that the guru is a bodhisattva, then you will receive the blessing of a bodhisattva; if you that think the guru is a buddha, then by supplicating the guru, you will receive the blessing of a buddha. How much blessing you receive depends on your own way of thinking.

-The End-



■ His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



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