



The Significance of a Two-Day Major Empowerment

His Holiness the Sakya Trichen



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By the merit of this work, may His Holiness the Sakya Trichen enjoy perfect health and a very long life, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

To truly embark on the Vajrayāna path, the first step is to receive an empowerment.

There are many types of empowerments and initiations. What are the differences between them?

Is there a sequential order in receiving empowerments and initiations?

Can any teacher bestow an empowerment or initiation?



What are the prerequisites to receive an empowerment?

In this teaching, His Holiness provides a detailed explanation about empowerments and initiations.

May we fully cherish this precious human life and truly embark on the Vajrayāna path for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The Significance of a Two-Day Major Empowerment

The topic of tonight's Dharma talk is why it is necessary to receive the two-day major empowerment prior to receiving a short initiation. The question is not easy to answer simply.

First, I would like to give a general explanation of the Buddha's teaching. The great Lord Buddha, who possesses infinite wisdom, compassion, and power, through his skillful means, bestowed an enormous number of teachings. The Buddha performed many great activities to benefit sentient beings—physically, verbally, and mentally—but the most important of these was his verbal activity of teaching, which is called turning the wheel of Dharma. To turn the wheel of Dharma means to give the teachings of the Buddha that save sentient beings. Putting the great realization that he attained into words, the Buddha gave teachings for his disciples to study, contemplate, and meditate. Through these activities, by following the teachings of the Buddha, we can proceed on the path to liberation and perfect enlightenment and will eventually arrive at our destination.

The Buddha has given an enormous number of teachings. We commonly talk about the 84,000 teachings of the Buddha. But this is not the total number of teachings that the Buddha gave. It is only the number of teachings that a certain disciple said that he heard. The number of teachings given by the Buddha really has no limit. This is because the Buddha's purpose in giving the teachings is to benefit sentient beings, and sentient beings have no limit—just as space has no limit. In this way, the Buddha's teachings also are limitless.

We can divide these limitless teachings in different ways—for example, by their chronology, or by subject. However, the most common way to divide the teachings is according to two types of disciples: the disciples who follow a smaller goal and the disciples who are aiming for a greater goal. Thus, there are two main traditions today, the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna.

The goal of the Hīnayāna is to attain liberation or nirvāṇa for oneself, while in Mahāyāna the goal is to attain full enlightenment not only for one's own sake but for the sake of all sentient beings. The first division is into the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna. Then, within the Mahāyāna tradition, we have the Vajrayāna and the general Mahāyāna. The latter goes by different names, such as the Sūtrayāna, Paramitayāna, or the Cause Yāna. These all refer to the same thing. Then, the Vajrayāna is also called the Extraordinary Yāna, Tantrayāna, or Mantrayāna—all these refer to the same thing. Sūtrayāna is called the Cause Yāna because the cause and

the result are very different from each other; there is a great distance between the cause and the result. Vajrayāna is called the Result Yāna because, right from the beginning, one takes the result into one's practice. In this way, it becomes far easier to accomplish the result.

It is said that an eon in which a buddha appears in the universe is a "light eon." An eon in which a buddha does not appear is a "dark eon." During the present eon, there will be one thousand buddhas, and for this reason, it is also called a "fortunate eon." Of the one thousand buddhas, our present Lord Buddha Shakyamuni is the fourth. And out of all the buddhas in this eon, only Buddha Shakyamuni will bestow the Vajrayāna teachings to common followers.

It is said that many eons in the past, long before attaining enlightenment, these one thousand buddhas were princes born to a single universal emperor. They were all together at that time, praying and developing the aspiration to buddhahood together. Their spiritual guardian, a brahmin, collected their names, wrote them all down, and mixed them together in a vase with precious jewels. All the princes prayed about when and where they were going to attain enlightenment. The order in which their names, mixed with precious jewels, were drawn one by one by the brahmin from the vase determined who would attain enlightenment first, second, and so on. None of the princes wished to attain enlightenment during a dark eon because during dark

eons all beings have strong defilements that are very difficult to subdue. Instead, they all wished to attain enlightenment in a golden or a light eon.

Our present Buddha Shakyamuni, who possesses special compassion and aspirations, made the wish to attain enlightenment during a dark eon. He made a very courageous, strong, and compassionate aspiration. He also prayed that the defilements of beings in the dark eon would not be a hindrance but instead could become a help, something to be used on the path. Because he took this very courageous decision, only Buddha Shakyamuni was empowered to bestow the Vajrayāna teachings to common followers. In the same way that the child going to the poorest country to benefit beings should take the best share of wealth, so Lord Buddha Shakyamuni was empowered to bestow the Vajrayāna teachings to common people.

In some teachings, such as the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*, it is stated that all past buddhas bestowed Vajrayāna teachings, that all the future buddhas will bestow Vajrayāna teachings, and that the present buddhas will bestow Vajrayāna teachings again and again. However, most tantric teachings say that none of the other buddhas give Vajrayāna teachings. There appears to be a contradiction. The question was brought to Drogön Chögyal Phagpa, one of the five founding masters of the Sakya order. He answered, “There is no contradiction. All the buddhas gave Vajrayāna teachings to their superior disciples, but only Buddha

Shakyamuni gave the Vajrayāna teachings to ordinary people.” So, what the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* refers to are higher-level disciples. For these beings, all the buddhas give the Vajrayāna teachings.

In this way, one can see that it is a very rare opportunity to hear the Vajrayāna teachings and to receive the Vajrayāna practices. But to enter the Vajrayāna path, it is absolutely essential to receive empowerments and initiations. If someone were to try practicing Vajrayāna, doing the visualization and recitation, without receiving the transmission from an authentic guru through an authentic empowerment, then instead of accomplishing the result, they would face very severe consequences, even if they understand the meaning and know how to do the practice.

Now, to proceed with the topic of tonight’s Dharma talk—why it is necessary to receive a two-day major empowerment prior to receiving a short initiation—it is important to understand that there are three kinds of Vajrayāna initiations. The first is called a *wangchen*, or “great empowerment” or “major empowerment.” The second is a *chinlap*, or blessing. The third is a *jenang*, or permission, which is usually the shortest of the three. The *wangchen* is the most important. It is usually a two-day empowerment ceremony. Through the *wangchen*, disciples are said to be “ripened.” Just as fruit needs to be ripe before it can be eaten, so to enter the Vajrayāna path one has to become ready, or ripe. To ripen the body, speech, and mind, one needs to receive a major empowerment and not just a short initiation. Some

wangchens take only a single day, but most of them take two. The first day is mainly concerned with preparation. It involves throwing the tooth stick to see which *siddhis*, or attainments, one will be able to accomplish, tying the protection thread, and then observing one's dreams for something significant regarding attainments. It is a kind of test, and if you have the right signs, then the next day you receive the empowerment.

There are two parts to the empowerment itself. The first is called entering into the maṇḍala. This refers to throwing the flower upon the maṇḍala. Through this, one can see whether one has a karmic connection with the Vajrayāna path and is ready to practice it. One can also see to which kinds of deities one has a karmic connection. Then comes the actual empowerment. Receiving a major empowerment such as the Hevajra cause empowerment is very important because it is through the empowerment that you are led into the Vajrayāna path, ripened, and empowered to do the visualizations, recitations, and meditations. Without it, you are not empowered to do any of these practices. Just like cultivating a new field on wild land, the empowerment requires a lot of preparation. First, you need to plough the field, then dig out all the weeds and stones, and so on, to make it a proper field where crops can grow. Receiving the major empowerment is just like this.

Next, we have chinlaps, or blessings, like the Vajrayoginī blessings. You cannot receive the chinlaps without receiving the major empowerment. This is because chinlaps are for practitioners

who are already ripening, those who have already entered the Vajrayāna path. *Chinlap* means blessing, and it will enhance the primordial wisdom and help it to rise and grow quickly. For this reason, it is absolutely necessary for someone to have already received a major empowerment before receiving a chinlap. The chinlap improves what you already have. If you have not received a major empowerment, then a chinlap cannot introduce the primordial wisdom, or help it to ripen. If the field has already been planted, you do not need as much work to improve it. In the same way, someone who has received a major empowerment should later receive a chinlap. It will make the seed that has been planted grow faster, and this is definitely necessary.

Next there are jenangs, which are like permissions. These are usually short initiations. In the Vajrayāna, there are four classes of tantra. The Vajrayāna teachings are vast and extensive in number, and different mahāsiddhas have classified them according to different divisions, such as six classes of tantra, or four classes, or three, but the usual classification, especially in our tradition, is four classes of tantra.

The first, *kriyā* tantra, is the most basic. *Kriya* means activities or physical actions. Kriyā tantras contain basic practices intended for inferior persons who are not able to emphasize inner meditation. They focus on physical and verbal activities, such as *nyungné*, the fasting ritual. Second is *charyā* tantra, which is for mediocre persons. Charyā tantra emphasizes both physical activities and

inner meditation. The third, *yoga* tantra, is for superior persons, those who can emphasize inner meditation. Finally, *anuttarayoga* tantra is for very superior persons. *Anuttara* means “nothing higher.” This class of tantra recognize that all conditions—both good and bad—can be taken into the path. Through this emphasis, one can practice the highest form of meditation.

The four classes of tantra have different *sādhanas*, or practices, and also different deities and empowerments. For example, *kriyā* tantra, which is at a basic level, has no practice of self-creation, strictly speaking. It is close to the *Sutrayāna* in which there is also no self-creation. In *Sutrayāna*, every sentient being is said to possess buddha nature as a seed, but a follower is not yet a buddha. To become a buddha, you need to accumulate great merit and wisdom, and so on. The distance between buddhas and sentient beings is very large. The *kriyā* tantra is like the *Sutrayāna* in this way. In *kriyā* tantra, there is no practice of creating oneself in the form of a buddha or deity. The deity remains in front, and we remain in the ordinary human form, making offerings, reciting praises and mantras to please the deity. When the deity is pleased, then the deity bestows the *siddhis*. Taking the *siddhis* this way is like receiving them from your boss, ruler, king, or queen. You please the ruler, king, or queen in order to achieve your wish.

In *charyā* tantra, you also invoke the deity in front of you. The deity has two aspects—the *samayasattva* and the *jñanasattva*. The *samayasattva* is the physical form of the deity, and the *jñanasattva*

is the wisdom form. In other words, they are physical and spiritual aspects. In charyā tantra, you are physically in the form of the deity, but you do not possess the wisdom aspect. The wisdom aspect of the deity is in front of you, and you are in the form of the deity almost like wearing a mask. In charyā tantra, one's status is raised. The relation is not like a ruler and a subject. Instead, both are at the same level. This way of receiving the siddhis is like from a friend because you and your friend are on an equal base.

Yoga tantra is even higher. You practice self-creation in the physical form of the deity, and then you invoke the wisdom aspect. Next, you draw in and absorb the wisdom aspect. But the two are not totally mixed. You have to bind them, just like two pieces of wood are nailed together. In the sādhana, there are different mudras that are used to bind these physical and wisdom forms of the deity together. Then, at the end of the sādhana, you separate them. The wisdom aspect of the deity returns to the buddha field, while you remain in the physical form of the deity.

In anuttarayoga tantra, you are likewise in the physical form of the deity, and you invoke the wisdom aspect. But then, the two are completely merged, just like mixing water with water. The physical and the wisdom aspects of the deity are completely merged and become inseparable.

Because the sādhanas or practices for the four classes of tantra are different, the empowerments for the four classes are also different.

Generally speaking, it is necessary to receive the appropriate empowerment, or wangchen, before receiving a jenang. For example, before receiving a kriyā tantra jenang, one should receive a kriyā tantra empowerment, such as the empowerment of the three bodhisattvas^[1] (Tib. *rigsum gonpo wangchen*). The same is true for charyā, yoga, and anuttarayoga tantras. But there are also exceptions. There are definitely some simple jenangs or rigtés (*rigté* means giving the mantra; *rig* means mantra, *té* means giving), mostly for kriyā tantra deities, that do not require that one receive a wangchen first. There are not many of this kind, but they exist. For the other jenangs, at least according to our Sakya tradition, it is necessary to receive the major empowerment, or wangchen. However, different lamas give different explanations. Also, different traditions have different ways of handling this, so there is not a simple or an easy answer. Chinlaps, or blessings, definitely require a wangchen, but some simple rigtés or jenangs of the kriyā tantra definitely do not.

Different traditions give different explanations. For example, the Geluggpas, one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, also say that to receive a jenang you need to receive the major empowerment, but they still give jenangs to everyone. During the jenang itself, the guru or teacher will explain that those who have received a major empowerment should visualize themselves in the form of the deity, because the major empowerment allows one to do this visualization, while those who have not received a major empowerment are not allowed to visualize themselves in this

form. The latter group should visualize the deity on the top of their heads as a blessing. This is one way of giving the jenang to everyone. Other traditions, like the Nyingma and Kagyü, are even more open. According to them, some of the jenangs that are a little more elaborate can be substituted for a major empowerment. In this way, they also can be given to everyone.

In the Sakya tradition, some of the simple rigtés or jenangs definitely do not require that one has first received a wangchen. But chinlaps and the higher jenangs, especially those of the anuttarayoga tantra, which has the four empowerments, definitely do require the wangchen. A jenang cannot be a substitute for a wangchen, which ripens your mental continuum, and this is the point I wanted to explain. As an example, there is the Avalokiteśvara or Chenrezig sādhana that we do here. In it, the practice that combines Great Compassion and Mahāmudrā is a very high practice. To do such a practice, one should definitely have a major empowerment.

As it is said in many teachings, whether one practices Dharma or not is an individual choice. No one can force you to practice the Dharma. If you practice the Dharma, you will receive the benefit, and if you do not practice the Dharma, you and no one else will face the consequence. So, when practicing the Dharma, it is best to follow it in the proper way. Whether Hinayāna, Mahayāna, or Vajrayāna, whichever tradition one wants to follow, it should be

done according to the rules and the tradition of the teaching. If one follows the Hinayāna, one should follow the Hinayāna way of practice. If one chooses to follow the Mahayāna, then the right way of practice is to generate from the beginning the Mahayāna motivation and to combine method and wisdom. If one is following the Vajrayāna, likewise, this must be done in the proper way, which is first to receive the major empowerment. This is very important. The empowerment causes ripening, making one ready to do the visualization with the body, recite the mantras verbally, and meditate on primordial wisdom with the mind. Also, receiving a major empowerment of the highest class, anuttara yoga, such as Hevajra or Chakrasaṃvara, means that one can receive lower tantra initiations without receiving the major empowerment of the lower tantra.

Generally speaking, then, all Vajrayāna practitioners should receive wangchens, or major empowerments, and those who wish to receive higher jenangs should have received the wangchen first. At the same time, there are some lower tantric deities and certain rigtés that do not require receiving a major empowerment first, because they do not involve visualization in the form of the deity. They resemble general Mahayāna practices in this way. In Mahayāna, we pray to the Buddha and think about the qualities of the Buddha. We seek the guidance and blessings of the Buddha. One may possess the seed of a buddha, but one is not a buddha, and one does not visualize oneself as a buddha. Because some of

the lower tantras are like this, there are certain rituals that one can do. But for most of the jenangs, especially in the higher classes of tantra—those that have the four empowerments—one is required to have received the major empowerment first.

Finally, it is also difficult to determine who has really received a major empowerment and who is really able to bestow a major empowerment. From the guru's side, giving the empowerment requires a lot of work and many qualities and qualifications. Ordinary gurus may have received the empowerment and do the rituals, but whether they can really bestow the empowerment remains a question. From the disciple's side, just being in the place where the empowerment is given does not necessarily mean that you have received it. To receive the empowerment, you must have the right motivation and you must fully understand it—what is to be purified, what is the purifier, and how it is purified. One may have attended major empowerments many times, but without clear understanding and right motivation, whether one has really received the empowerment remains a question.

In the Vajrayāna tradition, of course, devotion is very important. For example, when I was very young, I received certain initiations. As a very young child, I did not understand everything, and it would be difficult for me now to receive all those initiations again. Although I did not understand some of them, I consider that I have received the initiation when I can remember well where I received

it and when I received it. There are some that I do not remember at all because I was so young. I do not consider myself to have received these initiations fully, but to have received them only as blessings. For these, I have tried to receive the initiations a second time. Regarding the second time, while I received them with some understanding, I cannot always say that I had full understanding, yet I consider that I received them this second time.

So then, it is not so easy fully to give empowerments and not so easy fully to receive them. But as followers of the Buddha, and particularly as practitioners of the Vajrayāna path, we must try to do everything properly from beginning to end. Of course, no one can do things in a perfect way in the beginning. But as we proceed and improve, we will reduce our faults and increase our good qualities. In this way, we try to proceed on the path.

Notes:

[1] The three bodhisattvas are Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, and Vajrapāṇi.



■ His Holiness the Sakya Trichen is revered as the forty-first throne holder of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Born in Tibet in 1945, His Holiness is from the noble Khön family, whose predecessors date to the early days of Tibetan history and established the Sakya order in the eleventh century. In his youth, His Holiness received intensive training in Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and ritual from eminent masters and scholars.

Widely regarded as an emanation of Mañjuśrī, His Holiness is the spiritual guide to many in the next generation of Buddhist teachers and practitioners, and has bestowed Sakya's core teaching cycle known as the Lamdre (the Path with the Result) in both eastern and western countries. His Holiness manifests profound wisdom and compassion, tirelessly working to establish monasteries, nunneries, and educational institutions and to impart the Buddha's teachings to countless students around the world.



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