



POISON IS MEDICINE

Clarifying the Vajrayana

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse

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Clarifying the Vajrayana

This book is dedicated to those who, instead of dismissing the Vajrayana as a primitive superstition, have the merit to be curious about what the Vajrayana really is and who are daring enough to explore and apply the glorious, uncompromising, no-nonsense path that never kowtows to social norms and expectations.

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About this Book

POISON IS MEDICINE was written in response to the misunderstandings and misapprehensions about the Vajrayana that were exposed by the Vajrayana guru-related scandals of the 2010s. It is not an introduction to the Vajrayana path. If you know nothing about Buddhism and less than nothing about the Vajrayana, this book may not be for you. Those of you who have some knowledge and experience of tantra's profound and vast tradition may have a slightly better chance of making sense of this book than those who don't, but in all probability, you will end up just as confused. Forewarned is forearmed.

One of my reasons for writing this book is that I would like us all to think about and examine the various issues the recent Vajrayana guru scandals have brought to light, from as many different angles as possible. How much do Tibetan lamas really know about their non-Tibetan students? Which aspects of Tibetan Buddhism are rooted in Tibetan culture and preferences, and which are rooted in the Vajrayana? Why do Vajrayana gurus sometimes look and behave like despots or rock stars? Are the practices of pure perception and keeping samaya merely excuses for the lamas to control their students and force them to obey, come what may? Can you say 'no' to your Vajrayana guru? Should the Vajrayana be updated to fit the modern world?

I know that many of you are reading this book because you feel unsettled by what you have read and heard about Vajrayana gurus over the past few years. Even those of you who have been practising Tibetan Buddhism for several decades feel disconcerted because, in spite of your long connection, you realise that you have yet to receive a complete and authentic introduction to the Vajrayana. No matter

what your reason is for reading this book, I hope that, once you have contemplated its contents, you will feel better equipped to pursue your interest in the unparalleled Vajrayana path.

I must repeat and emphasize that this book is not an introduction to Buddhism. It has not been written for those who know nothing at all about the Buddhadharma and it is definitely not for those who know nothing about the Vajrayana.

Given all that has come to light in the Vajrayana world over the past few years, my wish is to offer aspiring Vajrayana students a few tips from the tantric texts about how to choose their guru. As such, I do not always define Vajrayana terms in this text and, even when I do, as the Vajrayana is supposed to be kept secret, my definitions and examples are necessarily vague or cryptic.

These days, the chances of any of us meeting a realised mahasiddha, let alone becoming his or her student, are slim. However much you long to follow the tantric path, choosing a tantric teacher can be intimidating. It's such a gamble! And although we are told again and again how important it is to analyse the guru and the path, we are rarely told what it is that needs analysing or how to analyse it. This book will, I hope, point you in the right direction by supplying you with the tools you need to examine a guru thoroughly before committing yourself. I should add that if, by some miracle, the guru you are interested in turns out to be a mahasiddha, not one word of this book is relevant or necessary.

Of course, only a buddha or another mahasiddha can tell whether or not a guru is an authentic mahasiddha, none of the rest of us can. And from the point of view of practice, students don't need that kind of information. The bottom line here is, and always will be, how you feel. How do you feel about the guru you are thinking of asking to be your Vajrayana guru? What does your intuition tell you? How intense is your wish to follow the Vajrayana path? How you answer these questions will depend largely on what Buddhists call *punya*, a loose and rather inadequate translation of which is 'merit'.

So, instead of wasting time trying to work out whether a guru is a mahasiddha or not, let your *punya*, your merit, point you in the right direction.

The relatively recent transplantation of Buddhadharma from Tibet and Asia to America, Europe and Australia has unwittingly led to a great deal of confusion about the Vajrayana path. Misconstrued language and a one-sided focus on Tibetan culture combined with some very bad timing, have conspired to fabricate all sorts of misunderstandings about Buddhism in general and the Vajrayana in particular. As a result, questions have been asked that need to be addressed. The snag here is that the Vajrayana rarely deals in black and white definitions, solutions, rules or mandates. And as I have no intention of even attempting to make up definitions, solutions or rules, I suggest we mull over the questions, issues, doubts and arguments that we are now aware of, and try to look at them all from as many different angles and perspectives as we can. In the process, let's try to make full use of the Vajrayana's deftness and perspicacity, and do our best to fully appreciate its sheer brilliance.

Yes, says the Vajrayana, certain thoughts and actions are doomed to send us straight to vajra hell and leave us there. But a second later, the very same Vajrayana reminds us that by simply chanting Vajrasattva's one hundred-syllable mantra once with perfect concentration, all past, present and even future defilements will be purified completely. In other words, the difference between 'doomed for all eternity' and 'complete liberation' is little more than a slight shift of dimension.

This book is based on four talks I gave at the Rigpa centres in Berlin, Paris, Lerab Ling and London in early 2018, just after the publication of a revealing letter that eight of Sogyal Rinpoche's students wrote to their guru, and eighteen months before he died. Many of the questions I was asked at that time – by Rigpa students as well as various other Vajrayana students and practitioners – were

not only interesting but also intelligent, penetrating and deeply felt. So much so that, once the tour was over, I was urged to consolidate our exchanges into a more compact form. This is one of the reasons I have written this book.

I would also like to take this opportunity to say how impressed I have been that, in spite of the shocking revelations and confusing stories we have all been showered with recently – particularly about Vajrayana gurus – so many people continue to cherish and follow the Vajrayana path.

Before we go any further, I should explain that although men have monopolized the job of Tibetan Buddhist guru for centuries, I have often described the hypothetical guru you are searching for as ‘she’ or ‘her’, partly to try to balance the historical ‘he’ and ‘him’, and partly because I have no wish to offend my more politically correct readers.

I don’t expect everyone who reads this book to accept everything I write. I know that some of you, especially those who leave comments on my social media pages, think I make too many sweeping statements – which you now consider to be my trademark. Even so, I hope that the information you find within these pages will help you to see your gurus and fellow students in a different light.

The Vajrayana is the best thing that ever happened on this planet. Not only does it train us to think outside samsara’s box, it shows us how to be inside and outside the box at the same time. And, although the tumultuous ocean of jealousy, anger, pride, doubt, greed and delusion that fills our minds can feel extremely daunting, the Vajrayana tells us it needn’t be. The antidote to all that poison is not outside us, but within. We already have exactly the right dose. Not a single drop is missing. Nothing needs improving, upgrading, customizing, or adapting. Our innate wisdom is the antidote we seek. It is perfectly intact and available for immediate use – as it always has been. Is this idea too hard for you to chew? If it isn’t, why

not have a go at tracking down your own innate wisdom. How? By following wisdom's footprints, which are your emotions.

The essence of the Vajrayana's message is that *poison is medicine* just as it is, with nothing added and nothing taken away. I hope and pray that none of you ever lose your enthusiasm for and curiosity about this glorious, brilliant and incomparable path.

Many thanks to all those who made my 2018 tour of Rigpa Berlin, Lerab Ling, Rigpa Paris and Rigpa London possible; to everyone who submitted a question; to Rigpa's excellent researchers, particularly Catherine Paul and Gill Kainey; and to Helen Cargill and Rigpa's team of transcribers who transcribed the teachings so quickly and efficiently. Thank you Adam Pearcey, Alex Trisoglio, Anne Benson, Arijit Bose, Arne Schelling, Badri Narayan, David Haggerty, Deborah Dorjee, Ian Ives, Larry Mermelstein, Prashant Varma, Suresh Vyas and Tashi Colman for answering an endless stream of questions. Thank you Dolma Gunther, Jakob Leschly, Karin Behrendt, Nikko Odiseos, Philip Philippou, Richard Dixey, Ron Stewart and Rigpa's Vision Board and advisers – Fian Löhr, Mauro de March, Philippe Cornu, Seth Dye, Verena Pfeiffer, Vinciane Rycroft and Yara Vrolijk – for reading and giving detailed and useful feedback on various drafts of this book. Thank you Ane Tsondru, Chris Jay, Pema Maya, Sarah K.C. Wilkinson, and Toni Whittaker for applying your excellent proofreading skills to this text. And thank you Andreas Schulz for designing the book.

Finally, I should mention that, once again, Janine Schulz put together all my frantic, disjointed text and voice messages to make this book, and helped research and identify its many arguments and points of view.

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse
February 2021

Foreword

WHEN ISAAC NEWTON wrote of standing on the shoulders of giants, he was acknowledging his debt to his scientific forebears and conveying a notion of cumulative progress—or ‘seeing further,’ as he put it—based on surpassing one’s predecessors. Tibetan Buddhism offers a different image for the transmission of wisdom, one where the giants of earlier generations appear above (typically seated on blossoming lotuses) and the beneficiary remains respectfully below. Here, spiritual achievement is more about living up to past standards than eclipsing them. Scientific knowledge begins from a position of ignorance and develops incrementally; dharmic knowledge begins with omniscience, which by definition cannot be improved upon, and confines evolution to the ways in which timeless truths are communicated.

Acknowledging the source of one’s learning and attainments is a mark of humility and integrity, especially when combined with gratitude. In time, appreciation may deepen into something more heartfelt, more akin to adoration. Consider, for example, Albert Camus’s effusive tribute to his teacher Louis Germain: “Without you, without the affectionate hand you extended to the small poor child that I was, without your teaching and example, none of this would have happened... I embrace you with all my heart.” These words, written shortly after being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, echo the formulae of Buddhist devotional verse: ‘Guru of unrepayable kindness, I only remember you.’

Of course, Buddhism, especially in its Vajrayāna form, takes the principle of appreciation much further than any form of secular education. For here teachers are not simply instructors in the ways of the world but reminders of its underlying reality—mirrors to our

true nature, as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche puts it later in these pages.

Yet even within Buddhism there are many kinds of teacher, from the humble elders or preceptors of the basic vehicle to the esteemed kalyāṇamitra, or spiritual mentors, of the Mahāyāna, and the formidable gurus or vajra masters of the tantras. In Tibet, where lamas came to dominate society to an unprecedented degree, the same system that created powerful and wealthy lines of tulku incarnations also produced subversive ‘crazy’ adepts who delighted in exposing hypocrisy and renunciant yogins who withdrew even from crowded monasteries in search of the genuine solitude of mountain caves and hermitages. At the same time, Tibetan literature developed sophisticated typologies, identifying various forms of guru, such as those who confer tantric empowerments, those who grant reading transmissions of esoteric texts, and those who share key instructions on the means of attainment, with special reverence reserved for those who combine all three roles and the so-called root gurus who transmit the highest wisdom by revealing the nature of mind.

The ultimate guru is none other than awareness itself. And, as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche’s predecessor, Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö (1893–1959), makes clear in his extraordinary guide to devotional practice, ‘The Bright Lamp of Wisdom’ (*Yeshe Saldrön*), this inner teacher, or guiding principle, is always with us, helping directly and indirectly, whether we recognize it or not. Relying solely on our own inner wisdom or intuition might seem appealing, but the transmission of knowledge and skills often requires a more tangible connection. We need others, wiser and more experienced than ourselves, to recognize and point out our weaknesses and blind spots, which is why the inner guru manifests as flesh-and-blood teachers, complete with their own traits and idiosyncrasies.

Traditional sources stress the need to examine a teacher before formally committing to a guru-disciple relationship, and systems of Buddhist education often combine rigorous scholastic learning

with long periods of meditative retreat in order to prepare teachers to uphold the highest standards. But somehow, in recent years, something somewhere has gone awry. Gurus have fallen short of expectations and ideals, and students have often found themselves unprepared to deal with the consequences. Both the advice on following a guru and the system of educating future teachers now require urgent reassessment.

Herein lies the challenge that Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche takes up in this book. As a highly trained representative of the tradition who is also intimately familiar with the peculiarities of modern culture, he is eminently equipped for the task. But his role is hardly an enviable one. With the Buddhist world now divided into seemingly irreconcilable factions, the strength of feeling is such that anyone seeking to introduce a degree of nuance into the debate risks attack from both sides. Pleasing everyone, a forlorn hope at the best of times, looks to be entirely out of the question.

Some detractors have gone so far as to advocate the wholesale elimination of apparently troublesome aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, with guru devotion a primary target. Worshipping an individual is perilous, the argument goes, insofar as it invites cultish excess and misconduct; it was not a feature of the early Buddhist tradition, and is little more than a remnant of feudal influence, an outmoded relic for which there can be no place in the rational, progressive Buddhism that is emerging in the modern world. For its advocates, recent events in Rigpa, Shambhala and elsewhere have only served to confirm the truth of this position.

Yet, there remain those for whom devotion is the very essence of the path. Without it, they argue, Buddhism would become dry, lifeless, disconnected from the heart. For there can be no denying that countless students over the centuries have made guru yoga the core of their practice and have attributed any progress in meditation, insights into the nature of reality, or heightened love and compassion to the guidance and blessing of their teachers. Many of the best-

known works of Buddhist literature, from the songs of Saraha to those of Milarepa, feature moving, poetic expressions of homage, gratitude and longing, and the entire revelation known as the Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse (Longchen Nyintik) was famously inspired by Jigme Lingpa's devotion to Longchen Rabjam. With such models in mind and with practical manuals that describe ardent devotion as a universal panacea and sure-fire means to attain realisation, it is hardly surprising that some people's admiration for their gurus will withstand any amount of obloquy.

These, then, are the two extremes in the debate over Tibetan Buddhism's future: modernizing reformers for whom the tradition is systemically corrupt and susceptible to abuse versus those who would ignore or downplay recent scandals and carry on regardless. Meanwhile, somewhere in the middle—a familiar habitat for Śākyamuni's would-be heirs—are the diminished ranks of those who favour a reckoning with, rather than rejection of, long-held tenets and ideals. For these hypothetical middle-grounders, faults are not endemic to the system itself but arise from a failure to live up to it.

Traditional narratives set the bar for devotion and dedication at an imposing height: Nāropa's trials under Tilopa; Milarepa's toils at Marpa's behest; Sadāprarudita's ordeals in pursuit of Prajñāpāramitā instruction from the bodhisattva Dharmodgata; and Mandāravā and Yeshe Tsogyal's attendance on Padmasambhava. Such legendary encounters, oft-cited paradigms of the guru-disciple relationship, may have inspired generations of practitioners in the past, but contemporary readers are liable to regard them as much with suspicion as with awe. Commanding a disciple to steal, to construct a nine-story tower single-handedly or to wait seven years, standing all the while, for one's teacher to arise from meditation, would likely result in legal sanction, as would whacking a student in the face with a dirty sandal. Moreover, these provocative encounters are not confined to the distant past; even more recent episodes from

the biographies of lineage-holding gurus might prove difficult to replicate today: Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje's (1800–1866) drunken manhandling of Patrul Rinpoche (1808–1887), for instance, or Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's (1820–1892) insistence that Gatön Ngawang Lekpa (1867–1941) be repeatedly ejected from Dzongsar Monastery's assembly hall, a requirement that many would find mean-spirited at best.

Even more problematic are the cases of apparent coercion of women to serve as consorts. Once again, there are historical precedents for recent scandals. To cite just one example, the pressure put on Sera Khandro Kunzang Dekyong Wangmo (1892–1940) to become the sexual partner of various lamas including Adzom Drukpa (1842–1924), who was fifty years her senior, raises questions about the liberty of even the highest-ranking female adepts in Tibetan Buddhist society. Modern scholarship is also now addressing the role of secrecy in guru-consort relations and the extent to which past figures, including the semi-legendary Yeshe Tsogyal, may have served as models to be emulated. At the same time, in a long-awaited yet significant step toward gender equality, Tibetan women now have greater opportunities for spiritual advancement, with the highest degrees of *geshema* and *khenmo* finally obtainable as part of an effort to improve the education of nuns.

Given that historical sources valorize acquiescence and submission to a potentially hazardous degree, one potential remedy might be to counterbalance accounts of obedience with narratives grounded in common sense, rationality and inquiry. There have certainly been Buddhist philosophers throughout history who diverged, sometimes radically, from the views of their teachers. In recent times, we could point to Alak Damchö Özer's claim that it was his duty to highlight supposed errors in the writings of his teacher, Jamgön Mipham Namgyal Gyatso (1846–1912) or to the famously iconoclastic Gendün Chöpel's (1903–1951) heated debate with his former teacher Sherab Gyatso (1884–1968) over the shape of the earth. Tibet's huge

corpus of biographical literature affords many further examples of disciples contesting their teacher's views or finding creative ways to carry out instructions. (There is even an academic research project currently dedicated to compiling cases of such subtle contrarianism.) Yet this is a highly sensitive issue, complicated by the fact that the Vajrayāna often prides itself on its transcendence of rationality and revels in the playful flouting of convention.

Highlighting the (limited) scope for nonconformity and polite disagreement need not undermine the authority of authentic teachers or give license to outright dissension. Indeed, the samaya commitments, adopted during tantric empowerment, focus overwhelmingly on the need to avoid upsetting or displeasing the guru in any way. Samaya is often explained by means of lists, a lengthy series of dos and don'ts that constitute the ethical precepts of the Vajrayāna. These pledges include the injunction to recognize the teacher as the Buddha and obey his or her every command. Failure to do so has grievous consequences including rebirth in hell. Some of the language and imagery deployed is thus suggestive of a Faustian pact—reneging on which entails nothing less than (spiritual) annihilation. Given the apparent risks, it is legitimate to ask why any sane person would ever agree to such a contract, even with safeguards in place. The only answer is that the potential benefits must be seen to outweigh the potential dangers. Indeed, it is possible to present samaya in positive terms: maintain these vows and you will reap the corresponding rewards, follow the outer guru correctly and you will recognize your own inner guru. Yet, needless to say, such a formulation takes it for granted that gurus will also uphold their end of the bargain and not abuse their position.

Even authentic teachers may appear fallible or imperfect at times, the texts concede, merely by virtue of being human—to be human is to err, one might say—but this does not mean that they forfeit their ultimate perfection. As Guru Padmasambhava explains in *Eliminating Inauspiciousness (Tendrel Nyesel)*, a revelation of Tertön

Sogyal (1856–1926), although the Buddha’s form emanations may appear to be at fault, this is due to the fickle perceptions of ordinary beings, which are like clouds temporarily blocking the light of the sun. The Buddha’s true body, meanwhile, remains the immaculate, formless dharmakāya.

A teacher’s ultimate perfection is sometimes expressed in simple terms. Whether or not a guru is actually enlightened, Jigme Tenpai Nyima (1865–1926) says, the act of teaching the Dharma occurs only through the inspiration and blessings of the buddhas, and the guru’s role is therefore that of an intermediary, similar to a spirit medium or oracle. The teacher is a buddha by virtue of being a channel through which the buddhas’ message is imparted. It is what is broadcast that matters, more so than the device on which it appears. Another famous example, that of the old woman and the dog’s tooth, shows that the student’s perception is paramount: buddhahood is in the eye of the beholder.

Dzogchen, or the Great Perfection, goes further by instructing its followers to see the teacher not so much as a buddha in the flesh as a dharmakāya buddha beyond the flesh (and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to). This point is forcibly brought home in an episode from the life of Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang (1879–1941). On one occasion, as he was helping his aged teacher Nyoshul Lungtok (1829–1901/2) visit the latrine, he repeated a playful remark that his teacher had made about his wolfskin waistband resembling a tail. Such a mild comment may not strike us as problematic, but Nyoshul Lungtok chided him nonetheless with a reminder that to view the guru’s form (including his dress, it would seem) as ordinary could hinder progress. This in turn recalls the Buddha’s oft-cited remarks from the *Vajracchedikā* (*Diamond Cutter*) *Sūtra*: “Those who see my body as ordinary form and hear my voice as ordinary sound have set out upon a mistaken path; such people do not truly see me.”

Considering the many risks and intricacies involved, it is not surprising that some might feel deterred from following a guru, at

least formally. Arguably, however, there is no avoiding some form of devotionism in life. As the author David Foster Wallace pointed out, we all revere something, be it power, money, ethical principles or the intellect. In Buddhist terms, we might say that everyone is on their own path. The question is not simply where it leads, but also who is showing the way. If we are to learn from our own and others' mistakes, we cannot blithely continue along the same route without at least pausing to ask questions. Yet nor should we necessarily abandon our former path entirely for another, seemingly safer road, where we will only encounter a new set of assumptions, values and idols. There remains the option of following wise, compassionate guides—outer and inner, human and transhuman—as a means to 'see further', beyond the limitations of individual habits and cultural conventions.

As Tibetan Buddhism attempts to get its house in order, commitment to the truth has broadened to include inquiries into what went wrong in the past and how such mistakes may be avoided in the future. While such analysis is necessary and important, it would be a pity if the quest for answers were to displace an altogether more transcendent form of truth-seeking. This book does not allow for such an outcome. It eschews easy answers and any temptation to tell people simply what they wish to hear. While such an approach is liable to invite censure from social media's self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy, any less would do the genuine tradition a disservice.

Adam Pearcey

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Introduction

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I was approached by a very anxious-looking Brazilian woman who was so nervous that she could barely get her words out. After a couple of false starts, she managed to ask me for a private audience, so I steered her towards a quiet corner and waited for her to speak. She was clearly in two minds about something and desperate to make a decision. In a minute or two, she pulled herself together, wiped her visibly sweaty hands on her shawl, then formally made the request to become my student. So that was it! She wanted me to be her Vajrayana guru.

Over the years I have received many such requests, mostly from non-Tibetans (people born outside the Himalayan region) – which in itself is interesting and will be discussed later in this book. Like the Brazilian woman, many supplicants are so jittery that they can hardly meet my gaze and, in my experience, men often find the process even more nerve-racking than women. Sadly, the majority of so-called lamas rarely notice. I wish those of us who have been landed with the job of spiritual teacher, or guru, were more sensitive to what modern people put themselves through for the sake of their spiritual life. It's very moving. We lamas should cherish the trepidation felt by potential students. Why? Because it's a clear sign they have realised that putting themselves unconditionally into another person's hands, particularly the hands of a Vajrayana guru, is a hugely big deal, yet they are willing to take the risk.

Unfortunately, today's gurus become jaded very quickly. They don't notice how hard it is for contemporary students to ask a teacher to become a guru, or what people are prepared to put themselves through in order to do it. But shouldn't the lamas be just as nervous as the students? After all, the relationship between a Vajrayana

guru and student is not only far more complicated than that of a married couple, it is of far greater consequence. Strictly speaking, a Vajrayana guru who takes their bodhisattva vow seriously should consider each student to be their principal project, not just in terms of the enlightenment of that student, but as a step towards the enlightenment of countless other sentient beings. To me, it's mind-boggling that lamas like myself *don't* have sweaty palms, or tremble and fumble each time they accept a new student. I hope and pray that all future gurus will become just as anxious and jittery as their students.

We read in the sutras that the bodhisattvas of the past willingly sacrificed absolutely everything, including their very lives, for the sake of one verse of Dharma. I would say that the nervousness and apprehension modern people experience when they ask someone to be their Vajrayana guru is very like the willing sacrifice – the renunciation – those bodhisattvas used to feel.

At some point, everyone who follows the Vajrayana tradition will be told that they need a guru. “Life is short! Time is running out. You should find yourself a guru!” Pressure may also be exerted by kind, concerned, but overzealous older students who, in their eagerness to sell the unique qualities of their own beloved guru, corner newer students, then lure, even push them into opting for a Vajrayana guru far too soon.

If you are sober and level-headed enough to know the enormity of the risk you are taking by surrendering to a Vajrayana guru, the entire process will make you anxious. “Am I capable of this? Is my guru capable of doing her part? Is she trustworthy?”

Your anxiety will soon turn into trepidation if you are told that when the relationship between a Vajrayana guru and student goes drastically wrong, it is the student who goes straight to hell. This widely held assumption is completely untrue. Time and again, the most venerated tantric texts state that if a guru and student click,

both will attain enlightenment, but if the relationship backfires in any way, *both* will go to vajra hell. So, gurus can go to hell too. Unless, that is, the guru is a mahasiddha, in which case he or she will make sure the student avoids rebirth in any of the lower realms, including vajra hell. What is vajra hell? Traditionally, it is said to be the hell reserved for Vajrayana practitioners who break their samayas, and from which it is almost impossible to escape – but this is another subject that we will discuss later in the book.

Clearly, the Vajrayana guru-student relationship should *never* be entered into lightly, but it often is. And when things go wrong, the root of the problem – the misunderstanding, error or mistake that was made – can usually be traced back to the moment the student stepped onto the Vajrayana path and first entered into a relationship with a guru.

ONE

Me and My Gurus

I WAS BORN into a staunchly Buddhist family and brought up in a traditional Buddhist country. I never had to ask Kyabje Sakya Trizin to be my guru. I have never felt the trepidation the Brazilian woman felt about whether or not my gurus would accept me. I have never asked myself, “Will I be a good student?” – perhaps, subconsciously, an inborn arrogance prevented the thought from even occurring to me. I have never had to analyse my guru or wonder if he was trustworthy. Neither did I have to seek my guru out because in Himalayan regions like Tibet and Bhutan, we usually inherit our gurus. The Bhutanese, for example, simply take whichever guru happens to be their village lama or family guru as their Vajrayana guru. Nothing in the Vajrayana texts supports such a practice, but that is how it is often done.

In my case, Kyabje Sakya Trizin became one of my gurus partly because Dzongsar Monastery is a Sakya monastery and partly because it was he who recognized me as the incarnation of Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö. Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche became my guru because, after Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö passed away, Kyabje Rinpoche took on many of his responsibilities and it seemed natural. Dudjom Rinpoche became my guru because in the village where I was born, everyone saw him as Guru Rinpoche in the flesh. So much so that, when I was very young, my tutors would reprimand me when I related to Rinpoche as my grandfather. But none of these reasons align with the advice provided in the Vajrayana texts, which means my own gurus were not chosen ‘by the book’.

I received tantric teachings from a few dozen gurus, most of whom were students of Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö. I didn’t choose any

of them myself. Often, they were chosen for me by Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche or one of my other gurus, because they were the most appropriate lama to give me a specific teaching or abhisheka. I have never received tantric teachings willy-nilly! Just because a tantric lama happened to be in town and was also a student of Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö didn't mean I automatically received teachings from him. All the teachings I received and all the gurus I received those teachings from were carefully selected for me by my own gurus and tutors. My education was planned with meticulous care. As a teenager, I remember coming up with the idea that I should receive a particular teaching from a specific master. When I talked to Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche about it, he said, "Let me think it over". Then the next day he said, "Not right now." For me, my gurus' guidance was like having every meal prepared by a 3-star Michelin chef. I could relax in the certain knowledge that every decision they made about my education would be the right one. Was I lucky, or just plain spoilt?

As far as I remember, I have only had to thoroughly analyse three gurus before requesting teachings from them and, interestingly, all three were women: Sakya Jetsünma, Auntie Dechen-la, and Lama Muntso. I have since received teachings from Sakya Jetsünma, and Auntie Dechen-la, but so far, I have not had the merit to receive teachings or abhisheka from Lama Muntso – I continue to hope and pray that it will happen one day.

I should mention that, although I had many opportunities to receive Vajrayana abhishekas from my father, Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, I never wanted to. The few times he asked me to organize his texts and arrange his shrine before he gave an abhisheka, I never stuck around to receive it. Why? Because I didn't trust in my ability to maintain a pure perception of him as my Vajrayana guru. He was my father and my perception of him being my father was too deeply ingrained for me to see him as my Vajrayana guru. So, although he gave the Krodikali abhisheka many times, I purposefully did

not receive it, and later begged his sister to give it to me instead. Auntie Dechen-la lived in Lhasa at a time when travel between India and Lhasa was virtually unheard of, so we never met at family get-togethers. As I barely knew her, it was far easier for me to see her as my guru, and set our guru-student relationship on a firm foundation.

No matter how much care I take, I have often found myself sitting in teachings and abhishekas that I haven't requested and don't want to receive because I am too cowardly to get up and walk out. Every time it happens, I follow the Vajrayana's advice and don't participate in any way. As I did not attend the event because I wanted to receive the abhisheka, for me, the person who performs the ritual is not an initiation bestower. Instead, I merely sit through the ceremony, motivated by the wish to avoid creating a negative or bitter atmosphere. Therefore from my point of view, I do not receive the initiation.

All my gurus were and are the gentlest of souls – especially Kyabje Sakya Trizin, Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche. Always accommodating and nurturing, they have taken such great care of me. I don't remember any one of them raising their voices to me, let alone instructing me to perform impossible tasks like, "Build a nine-storey tower before sunset", or beating me with a backscratcher. When they told me stories about how Milarepa had been beaten repeatedly by his teacher Marpa, I never once imagined that they were preparing to do the same to me. I found their stories about Marpa and Milarepa incredibly inspiring. But then, I was born in a place and at a time when such stories were told to inspire us to practise the Dharma, not used to support lawsuits claiming emotional damage or to justify a student quitting the Vajrayana path. I never wondered if it was possible for a single man to build a nine-storey building, not just once but eleven times. The thought, "Is this story credible?" didn't even cross my mind. I didn't think like that. Was Milarepa a trained architect? Could Naropa really have survived his leap from the roof of a tall building? I didn't know or

care. None of us did. What inspired us was Milarepa and Naropa's single-minded longing for Dharma teachings. For us, inspiration took precedence over credible detail and I can honestly say that I find these stories even more powerfully inspiring today than I did more than half a century ago. Does that make me credulous and child-like? Probably. But then, who isn't?

Modern people tend to lump Milarepa and Naropa's life stories in with myths and fairy tales. In his article, *Why I Quit Guru Yoga*¹, Stephen Batchelor suggests that Tilopa and Naropa were characters in fables and their life stories mere allegories. Unable to imagine them in a contemporary setting, he chooses to believe that they didn't exist at all. I, on the other hand, choose to believe not only that Milarepa and Naropa lived, but that their stories are true.

Certain human beings have always been willing to make sacrifices in pursuit of their goals. Dancers, painters and musicians suffer pain and, in some cases, severe bullying for the sake of their art. I have been told that traditionally, the first part of a tabla student's training is to play stones, not drums, and to teach them how to set their hands correctly, stones are sometimes tied to their wrists. Social activists continue to endure imprisonment and even torture in pursuit of freedom and fairness. How much suffering we are willing to endure for the sake of an education seems to depend on what we want to achieve in life. If your goal is to live safely within your comfort zone until you die, it's unlikely you will challenge yourself or take any risks. But if your overriding ambition is to become a professional ballerina, you won't be put off by bleeding feet; and if you long to become a kathakali dancer, learning how to insert seeds under your eyelids to turn the whites of your eyes the traditional red will thrill you.

Would Nelson Mandela have challenged the apartheid system in the first place, if his priority had been his own personal comfort and well-being?

Cultural Perceptions: Humility

Although I found my gurus' genuine humility and respect for me as a human being unsettling, my discomfort was always mixed with admiration, even awe. My gurus were always humble, not just with me but with everyone they met. Whenever they gave a teaching, they would round off all their advice with, "But who am I to tell you what to do? It isn't really my job! Unfortunately, those who are truly qualified to give this advice are no longer in this world, and this is why the task has fallen to me." (Too many lamas these days say the opposite: "Listen and take to heart everything I say because I know exactly what I am talking about!")

Many years later, in an attempt at practising humility with my own students, I told them what my gurus had told me. Of course, we now know that cultural context is an extremely important factor when teaching the Dharma, but back then, I had no idea. I was therefore completely unprepared when a woman became extremely upset after I told her that the only reason I was offering her advice was because no one else was available. And I also told her that I was neither highly realised nor learned. She was furious with me for months. If I really was a nobody, she said, what was the point of her being my student? Needless to say, she was neither Tibetan nor Bhutanese. In Himalayan cultures, students are taught to admire a guru's modesty. Somehow, this woman's 'meeting the right guru' merit hadn't been accompanied by the merit of being inspired by humility.

What would happen if I did sell myself as a spiritual 'somebody', as so many gurus do these days? What if people fell for all the pompous hyperbole and convinced themselves that I am some kind of saint? In the long run, wouldn't that create a far more dangerous situation than merely discovering that the person teaching you Buddhism is just a nobody? I find it puzzling that so many modern

people are ready and willing to receive teachings from gurus who openly claim to be enlightened, omniscient and omnipotent. No harm is done if a guru really is enlightened and so on, but what if they are not? What if it's a scam? Wouldn't you rather be guided by a guru who tells you honestly that although he is not enlightened, he can give you some good advice that has been thoroughly tried and tested, than risk being scammed by a self-proclaimed guru? What if your decision to follow a braggart means you miss the opportunity of receiving teachings from a humble, self-effacing guru who later turns out to be enlightened? Wouldn't you kick yourself for missing such an opportunity? Students these days seem to fall for the big-talkers and when he or she disappoints, they sue. But disappointment would be avoided altogether if students made just a little more effort to analyse the guru before jumping in at the deep end.

By the time my mind was fully mature, I had been exposed to the western cultures and literature that promote intellectual curiosity and critical thinking. In the West, you are taught to think for yourself, to analyse and to question. Once I discovered how this spirit of enquiry worked, it began to affect how I thought. Even so, the words of the Buddha continued to have a far greater influence on me.

Buddha said that we should examine a teacher *before* he or she becomes our guru, and that we should never follow a person just because they are charismatic, entertaining, or famous. First and foremost, he said, we should follow the teaching not the teacher. Recently, I decided to try out this piece of advice, albeit retrospectively. I began by applying some western-style intellectual curiosity to my gurus. Of course, I am now even more aware of my gurus' true qualities than I was as a child. Nevertheless, I wracked my brain for memories of Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche and Kyabje Sakya Trizin's shortcomings, then filtered those memories through what I know of 21st century sensibilities. The result was that I regret more deeply than I can express not having thrown myself face down at their feet and begged

them to accept me as their student, body, speech and mind. If I could press the rewind button on my life, that is what I would do. If I had been able to beg them to accept me in that way, it would have washed away a multitude of obscurations and accumulated oceans of merit.

Tulkus: the Family's Meal Ticket?

It may surprise you to learn that I didn't apply for my teaching job, I inherited it. While I was growing up, the Tibetans who had become refugees in the late 1950s and early 1960s felt an urgent and completely understandable need to preserve their culture, tradition and the Dharma. As a result, given my family background, my future profession was never in question. Being a lama is often a lucrative job, but I can confidently say that my family's motivation for allowing me to be trained as a teacher was never self-serving. They never expected me to become the breadwinner and I have no memory of them ever benefiting materially from my position – quite the reverse.

My father, Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, was vehemently opposed to anyone earning a living from the Dharma and well-known for his incisive, closely argued reproofs. When I was named as the incarnation of Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö, instead of telling me how proud he was, he said he would have preferred me to be an anonymous gomchen – an ordinary practitioner. Why? Because he was worried that as Khyentse Tulku, I would become proud and egotistical and, as a result, tarnish the name of Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö. He was also worried that I would incur heavy karmic debts by accepting gifts from people who had to work hard for a living.

Although we didn't often meet up, my father's first words to me were always a rebuke – and he usually had a point. The only letter he ever sent me opens with a beautifully written verse of homage

to the buddhas, bodhisattvas and gurus, followed by ten pages of exquisitely crafted verses, each of which amounted to a serious bollocking. No one likes to be scolded, but my father was a superb writer and I loved his poetry. I read his words over and over again, until I knew the letter by heart. I still remember most of it, and my tutors taught me how to appreciate the preciousness of every syllable.

For my father, having a tulku for a son was anything but the winning lottery ticket it has now become. His attitude was the reverse of today's money-grabbing spiritual materialism – I really admired him for it. Too many families jostle to push their sons forward as teachers for the sake of the perks and the privileges.

Being a Lama: a Double-Edged Sword

I can't say that I don't enjoy one or two of the perks of being a lama. I am always given the best seats, I never have to queue, I never lack for company, and the label of Rinpoche has probably made me more attractive to the opposite sex. But all privileges have a flip side. A lama's life is often made stressful by other people's unfounded, illogical, unfair assumptions and expectations. The package that is 'being a lama' requires one to connect not only with a large number of diligent, sober, clear-headed students, but also with a smaller group of those who suffer from debilitating self-loathing and project an unimaginable number of expectations and assumptions onto their lama. Lamas are often lonely and bored, but also the centre of attention – which is never comfortable. Every aspect of a lama's life is picked over and discussed at length, which can feel invasive. For a while, I was paranoid about making sure that all my text messages and WeChat conversations, no matter how innocent, were deleted. But I now save every word in case it is needed as evidence. Even smiling at someone can be risky – how will it be interpreted? And now that everyone is a fully armed photographer, my every look and

gesture is captured, then plastered all over social media and endlessly speculated about. Every word a lama utters, especially in front of an audience, is interpreted so freely that white frequently becomes black. It is impossible to be playful and tease people anymore. Every word I say – even about Donald Trump – is taken so seriously!

Ironically, the lamas who find themselves living in the glare of such a spotlight also provoke jealousy, not only among their so-called students, but also other lamas. As hypocrisy and pretence have now been institutionalized in Tibetan Buddhism and passed down verbatim to the next generation, the jealousy one lama feels for another is rarely apparent in public. How do the lineage holders cope, I wonder? Especially the younger generation.

Would I have been happier as a cellist or a lawyer? Was my father right? Should I have been an anonymous gomchen? Who knows?

TWO

My First Brush with Western Students

I FIRST TAUGHT non-Tibetans (westerners) in Kathmandu in 1978. Thinking back, although I was totally unprepared to teach ‘injis’, I do remember being intensely curious about the West. At a time when most of my fellow Rinpoches had no interest in the modern world, I wanted to know everything. Where did the long-haired hippies come from? What made them tick? I had no idea. How could I? As far as I could see, all they had in common with each other were their blue eyes, brown, red and blonde hair, and pale skin. I knew nothing about the anti-Vietnam war movement, Allen Ginsberg or the Beatles.

I was 17 years old and fascinated by photography. I remember how thrilling it was to discuss photography with Ani Lodrö Palmo, who had studied the arts at Rhode Island School of Design. And how delighted I was with my first 35mm camera – a Minolta that Jakob Leschly gave me. I was as eager to learn about the West as the injis were to learn about the Dharma. But not once did I consider how their cultural, spiritual or political background might impact their understanding of what I said to them. To be honest, I wasn’t sure how genuine their interest in Buddhadharma really was. How could I tell? They may just have been fascinated by exotic Asian cultures, in the same way I was spellbound by photography – or hooked on ganja.

In the late seventies, the Tibetan view of westerners was mixed. Foundations and government schemes were extremely generous to the Tibetan people. The Tibetans themselves were more aware of sympathetic individuals, a surprising number of whom sponsored monks and lamas, built schools and monasteries, and put a great deal

of effort into supporting Tibetan attempts at rekindling the fading embers of their culture. In the process, the Tibetans grew used to thinking of all westerners as sponsors. Western sponsors must be rich, thought the Tibetans, simply because they were all so generous. It wasn't until many years later that we lamas began to realise how much poorer than ourselves some of our sponsors really were. It was also assumed that the majority of westerners were hippies, mostly because those we met usually had long hair, elaborately painted fingernails and wore jeans. Although it was obvious that westerners were curious about the Dharma, most Tibetans doubted whether they would be serious about study and practice.

Having said that, none of my first western friends were gullible or illiterate. Some were graduates from Oxbridge and the Ivy League, so they can't have been idiots. Most of them had travelled to Kathmandu to receive teachings from great masters like Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse and Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche, so there was no need for them to waste their precious time listening to me. The fact they did was what Buddhists describe as the workings of karmic connection, karmic debt and karmic link. Many of the westerners I met at that time became life-long Dharma practitioners. I have often wondered why Ani Lodrö Palmo, Charles Hastings, Sandra Scales and the rest of them bothered listening to a teenager who could barely speak English. Could they make head or tail of what I was saying?

As none of my teachers had ever consciously prepared me to teach a non-Tibetan audience, I had no clue about how to discuss the Dharma with people who had not grown up around prayer flags and stupas or singing Dharma songs. These injis did not think of animal-headed deities as divine beings, let alone representations of their true nature, and they certainly had no appreciation of the paradox that is the non-duality of emptiness and appearance. Many aspects of Tibetan Buddhism must have sounded rather far-fetched, especially the Guru Shishya Parampara (the teacher-disciple lineage

or apprenticeship), which is all but extinct in the more modern cultures. It therefore didn't enter my head that when a European or Australian or American asked a Tibetan lama to be their guru, they might actually be looking for a father figure, a companion, a lover, a god-like saviour, a father confessor, or just a sympathetic friend to hang out with.

It must also be said that, by and large, Tibetan lamas consider injis to be barbaric and uncivilised. The lamas always fail to notice how well-educated, analytical and systematic westerners are. And they are completely unaware of how highly many western cultures value critical thinking and the spirit of enquiry. Quite a number of the westerners I have met are open-minded in ways the Himalayan peoples rarely are. When I was growing up, Tibetan, Bhutanese and Nepalese tantric Buddhist practitioners simply weren't interested in anything outside their immediate frame of reference. Westerners also have a strong sense of the spiritual, which again, few Tibetan lamas have noticed.

As far as the Tibetans are concerned, all westerners are materialists. But if they paid a little more attention to western culture, they would probably change their minds. The modern world's most highly esteemed and valued thinkers and artists are a mystery to the Tibetans, as are movies like *My Dinner with Andre*, which asks, among other things, would we be happier if we tried to live spontaneously in the moment? And for centuries, the focus of a great deal of western music, art and literature – the vast majority of which is far superior to the Tibetan equivalent – was the worship and praise of God.

Even now, six decades after Tibetan Buddhism began its exodus from the Land of Snows, most lamas know next to nothing about the world outside their homeland. Many believe that life in the West is like a dumbed down, banal, stereotypical Hollywood movie. The lamas have yet to recognize how profoundly their western students have been influenced – consciously or unconsciously – by the

history, religious beliefs, ethics, morality and so on, that permeate their language, literature, songs, art and theatre, and colour their definitions of morality and ethics.

Time and again, I myself have seen how willingly westerners shrug off their religious and cultural roots for the sake of learning the Dharma. We lamas are supposed to help them, but we don't. And if we fail even to ask about their symptoms, how can we begin to diagnose their problems, let alone offer a solution?

Trungpa Rinpoche

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was the first Tibetan lama to take a genuine interest in westerners and their culture, and I am sorry to say that he may well be the last. It wasn't until I saw how Trungpa Rinpoche presented the Dharma in the West that I began to realise that westerners hold very different points of view to the Tibetans.

Trungpa Rinpoche's methods were thought out in the minutest detail. I remember seeing Shambhala students at Karmê Chöling, Vermont, being drilled like soldiers. I later learned that Trungpa Rinpoche had insisted that they salute English-style, not American. Rinpoche also asked his American students to practise elocution by saying 'Cathy's hair is black' in an English accent, over and over again. At first, it sounded like a ridiculous waste of precious time. What was he doing? It wasn't until many years later that I began to appreciate his methods.

During Vajrayana ceremonies in Tibetan monasteries, monks sit in neat rows, chant in unison, beat drums and blow horns in carefully choreographed rituals that have been performed in exactly the same way for hundreds of years. The monks of Mindrolling monastery are famous for the perfection of their group practices. One hundred monks can pick up their vajras and bells in unison without a sound.

Vajrayana ritual is very much a part of Tibetan culture and an effective method for aligning body and mind. In a way, it is a kind of mindfulness practice. How should this very Tibetan method be translated for non-Tibetans? Trungpa Rinpoche was probably the only Tibetan lama who had the guts and imagination to experiment. He taught his American students the practice of drill, making them march in sync like soldiers, and gave them English elocution lessons to increase their awareness. I thought his ideas were brilliant.

In the same way that to point at the moon you need a finger, deluded human beings need a vessel, a culture, to contain the wisdom they wish to uphold. Should Tibetan culture be imported lock, stock and barrel into America? No, said Trungpa Rinpoche, it shouldn't. Why import a Tibetan finger to point at a western finger if what you really want to do is point at the moon? It's futile. Is it possible to fit non-dual teachings into a vessel forged by Judeo-Christian values and traditions? Possibly. Many of us admired Trungpa Rinpoche's courageous, if somewhat avant-garde attempts. Nevertheless, news of his experiments raised eyebrows back home in the Himalayas, and even amongst the few westerners who had already been thoroughly marinated in Tibetan culture.

What I am trying to say is this: it takes time to work out how to present the Dharma to students from diverse cultures. It takes, time, planning, vision and diligence. And the merest suggestion of change inevitably attracts harsh criticism. Who among us has the guts to ask Americans to pronounce their vowels like the English? Or to dress hippies in military uniforms? Even Trungpa Rinpoche's shrine arrangement was a masterpiece, neither overwhelming western students with Tibetanness nor straying too far from Tibetan tradition. He chose to wear a suit and tie instead of heavy brocades and hats, and called himself 'Mukpo', which means Brown. He never bombarded his students with Tibetan paraphernalia, yet he never lost sight of his Tibetan roots. The traditions he grew up with were

adapted to suit the place, the time and the people he was teaching. And he skilfully wove in aspects of the Japanese aesthetic that he and his students found so appealing.

Trungpa Rinpoche, great visionary that he was, died too young. His death was not only a great loss for the Dharma but the entire future of Buddhism in the West. I must admit that, at first, I was critical of his methods. But I gradually began to see that, as we are now teaching such diverse peoples, not only must we take into consideration their cultural background but also the generation they were born into.

It bugs me that more is being said about Trungpa Rinpoche's eccentric behaviour than his courageous and inventive approach to teaching Americans. Just as parents spend hours talking baby-talk with their new-born babies, Trungpa Rinpoche willingly absorbed as much as he could of American culture and then tried to communicate with his American students on their level. How many other lamas have even made the attempt?

THREE

More by Accident than Design

TODAY, WE KNOW that Buddha was born in the Himalayas in present-day Nepal, then spent his life wandering through the region of northern India that lies to the south of Nepal. Yet, three hundred years ago, after seven hundred years of Muslim rule, India had all but forgotten about the Buddha. Until, that is, a few eccentric British colonizers and tea estate managers fell under India's spell and became fascinated by its native languages and culture². In the course of their Sanskrit studies, they stumbled across the teachings of the Buddha. A British Army officer called Alexander Cunningham famously rediscovered Bodhgaya. Thanks to him, we can now visit the exact spot of the Buddha's enlightenment.

Throughout the nineteenth century, European interest in the Buddha grew as reports of new discoveries in India became available. The first general historical account of Indian Buddhism, *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien*, was published in 1844 by French scholar Eugène Burnouf. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer famously described Buddhism as the "best of all possible religions" and even Friedrich Nietzsche became interested in Buddhism, albeit for all the wrong reasons. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, wrote:

I have visited the holy places of Buddhism in India and was profoundly impressed by them, quite apart from my reading of Buddhist literature. If I were an Indian, I would definitely be a Buddhist. But in the West, we have different presuppositions.³

Migration also played a major part in the spread of Buddhism throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1840s, Chinese Buddhists began emigrating to America; in the 1870s they were the first to take Buddhism to Australia. In the 1950s, Vietnamese refugees fled to America where they set up the first Buddhist institutions in the West. By the time the Tibetans were relocating to India in the 1960s, Buddhism had begun to attract a great deal of attention, thanks in no small part to the hippies, the ‘hippy trail’, weed (ganj), the Beat Generation, the Beatles, transcendental meditation and the Vietnam war.

For centuries, Christian missionaries travelled to the East to spread the gospel and convert the natives. Asians have therefore never had to seek out the Christian teachings. For westerners it was the other way around. I have heard some very touching stories about the higgledy-piggledy routes Buddhism took to the UK, America and Europe – especially about the hippies who followed The Beatles to India, accidentally bumped into Buddhism, tuned into transcendental meditation and took up yoga. But few of those who took an interest in Buddhism at that time were specifically seeking enlightenment and so they did almost no research or fact-checking. All of which made Buddhadharma’s centuries-long journey to the West haphazard, at best. Yet, in spite of its chaotic introduction, the results of having the Buddhist teachings in Europe, America and Australia have generally been good. The only real drawback is that quite a number of new Buddhists have been left with some quite hard-to-shake misconceptions and deeply rooted habitual patterns.

How Buddhadharma Spread to the East

Centuries before its arrival in the West, Buddhadharma’s journey to China, Japan and Tibet was rather less arbitrary. I think it’s fair to say that, as a succession of Tibetan kings bankrupted the country

in an effort to ensure that the Word of the Buddha took root, the Buddhist teachings arrived in Tibet as a result of state sponsorship. Since the project was managed by the king and received the full backing of his government, self-proclaimed gurus would have had to think twice before claiming to be authentic Buddhist teachers. In China, Empress Wu's personal involvement with the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese raised the quality bar exponentially; when the sovereign head of state commissioned a translation, it had to be perfect. Buddhism flourished in this way in Asia for some time and, to a greater or lesser extent, continued to prosper for centuries. But inevitably, the doors of institutional corruption had been thrown wide open.

Tibet held a unique position in the world. Having closed its borders to outsiders, few Tibetans had any reason to travel or learn foreign languages. Little was known about the outside world and nothing of its religions. Until very recently, there was no such thing as a spiritual bookshop in Tibet (amazon.com wasn't invented until the 1990s) which meant that Tibetans were never given the opportunity to choose between *Zen Mind*, *Beginners Mind* and an introduction to Theravada Buddhism; they didn't even suspect that such books existed. Not one of the great scholars in the Land of Snows had heard of Plato or his *Symposium*; even Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* failed to make it across the Chinese border. Had any of these books turned up in Tibet, the most likely reaction would have been disapproval – certainly from the heads of the monasteries. To the outside world, Tibet was a romantic, mysterious, magical forbidden land. But like so many closed civilizations, the Tibetans believed that, as they held so much Dharma within their borders, they lived at the centre of the universe and were paranoid about being contaminated by outsiders.

I am now in my sixtieth year and can honestly say that I have never heard a Tibetan song, or Tibetan music of any kind, that can touch the beauty of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. Neither have I read a Tibetan novel as gripping as the *Tale of Genji* by Murasaki

Shikibu or a Tibetan book on military strategy as brilliant as Sun Tsu's *The Art of War*. In fact, as far as I know, there are no Tibetan novels or symphonies; if there were, I am sure that, given my interest in music and literature, I would have come across them by now.

The Tibetans inhabited a world of their own, which is why they were able to use a Buddhist term like 'hinayana' without considering what it really means. They were devoid of the sensitivities that make today's Buddhists cringe when Shravakayana students are described as 'those tiny-car riders' or 'those childish, lowly people'. And, unsurprisingly, the Tibetans have always looked down at everything that is not Tibetan.

For a thousand years, all Tibetans were connected in one way or another with some form of Vajrayana Buddhism. From its prayer flags and prayer wheels to the secret tantric symbols that appear on traditional thangka paintings and the statues of demon-like, pig-headed deities wearing crowns of human skulls, in union with their consorts. Vajrayana Buddhism has been woven into the very fabric of Tibetan life. Secret tantric symbols continue to be flaunted openly, like the Irish flaunt their *an tridhathach* national flag at the St. Patrick's Day parades in Dublin and New York. Foreigners and foreign newspapers hardly ever entered the country, which meant that the Tibetans were never exposed to criticisms of their culture. Imagine how a hypercritical *New York Times* reporter in the Gilded Age might have relished exposing Tibet's openly-displayed pornographic spiritual art and accusing Tibetans of demon worship. It's true that over the years, one or two Catholic and Islamic missions were established in Tibet, but however obscene Tibet's sacred art may have looked to them, the priests and imams prudently avoided comment. I am sure they shared their true feelings about Tibet's improper erotic art when they got home, but in Tibet they were diplomatic and discrete.

The Tibetans themselves are so used to tantric symbols that they no longer see them for what they are and don't think twice about how

outsiders might interpret them. From a Dharma and particularly tantric point of view, the consequences of their blindness are mixed. Buddhadharma and Vajrayana wisdom were of supreme importance to the Tibetans, which was good for the entire country. But when Tibetan culture hijacked the Vajrayana – and I must be the millionth lama to have said this – it was a disaster for the Buddhadharma, particularly the Vajrayana. Once the Vajrayana symbols that appear on prayer flags, thangkas and so on, had been incorporated into Tibetan daily life, the idea that tantra should be kept secret was completely lost. While Tibet was isolated and everyone shared the same perception, this loss of secrecy didn't matter much. But once the Land of Snows had been cracked open and the lamas began decamping to India and the West, loss of secrecy began to matter a great deal.

Before going into exile, the vast majority of lamas had never heard of the powerful, well-established religions that hold sway over billions of people on this planet. Nothing in their previous lives had prepared them for the sophisticated and well-educated twentieth century people they now met, who understood quantum mechanics and whose ambitions were to fly to the Moon or to Mars, to build the longest bridge in the world, and to design the tallest building. Suddenly, the lamas found themselves surrounded by people with a completely different outlook on life and wildly diverse aspirations. All at once, they had to face the fact that not everyone in the world was inclined towards Buddhism. It must have been quite a shock. Worse still, the lamas were confronted by the existence of religions that counted tens of millions among their devotees, taught philosophies that were just as sophisticated as the Buddha's teachings and whose rites and cultures were, if anything, more elaborate. Take, for example, Christian church music, which is far more beautiful, varied and refined than Tibetan ritual music. The world's immense religious institutions wield unimaginable power and its great universities have been teaching theology and liberal arts

for a millennium. Christians are never content to merely sit in their churches and pray. Their mission is to minister to the sick and needy and to save souls, and so Christian missionaries travel the world to build hospitals and schools as they preach the Gospel.

As refugees, the lamas found themselves living in countries where the social norms, expectations, sense of individuality and education were nothing like those of Tibet. But rather than make an effort to get to know the cultural set-up in their adopted cultures or consider how tantric images might be interpreted in Switzerland and Scotland, the lamas either overlooked the differences or simply failed to notice them. They all built Tibetan-style gompas, then plastered the walls with images of deities in union, without a word of explanation or a single thought about how such images might be perceived.

That being said, the lamas had just lost their country, so perhaps we should cut them a little slack. The Dharma was such a huge part of their culture and identity, it's hardly surprising that in exile, they focused so single-mindedly on preserving it. Yet, one of the consequences of their single-minded devotion to their culture is that Tibetan Buddhism is now considered by some Chinese, Thai and Burmese Buddhists to be an adulterated form of a Hindu sex cult.

Most Buddhists are proud that their antecedents rarely sent missionaries out to convert the world to Buddhism. They may have a point. On the other hand, the lack of a Buddhist missionary tradition may be why the introduction of Buddhadharma into the West has resulted in such a hotchpotch of misunderstandings.

Christian missionaries were passionately committed to spreading the Gospel and to saving souls. They undertook dangerous, uncomfortable journeys to places like Peru, where they quickly learned as much as they could of the language and culture. Catholic missionaries who evangelised in India made use of Hindu practices and beliefs. I have been told of Jesuit missionaries who presented themselves as Brahmins, wore dhotis, shaved their heads except

for a single tuft of hair, became vegetarians and adapted as many Hindu symbols and customs to Christian worship as they could. Their churches were called *kōvil* (temple), holy communion was presented as *prasādam* (food offering), the Bible as *vedam* (Vedas) and the Catholic Mass as *pūjā* (worship). As recently as 2008, the Roman Catholic Church published an Indian Bible which includes quotations from the Vedas, Yoga Sutras and Upanishads. The Indianized Jesus is no longer nailed to a cross, but dances with joy as he plays a flute, looking very like Lord Krishna.

I am not suggesting that Buddhists should adopt the same kind of missionary zeal as the Christians, but if the lamas had made a little more effort to learn about the cultures, preferences, customs and languages of the countries in which they taught, I believe many of the current misconceptions about the Vajrayana would never have taken root.

FOUR

The Dharma vs. Culture, Tradition and Custom

“The Buddha told Ananda, “You and others like you still listen to the Dharma with the conditioned mind, and so the Dharma becomes conditioned as well, and you do not obtain the Dharma-nature. This is similar to a person pointing his finger at the moon to show it to someone else. Guided by the finger, the other person should see the moon. If he looks at the finger instead and mistakes it for the moon, he loses not only the moon but the finger also. Why, because he mistakes the pointing finger for the bright moon.”⁴

Śūraṅgama Sūtra

The 1973 film, *Enter the Dragon* famously used this same example, spoken by the late Bruce Lee:

“It is like a finger pointing a way to the moon: don’t concentrate on the finger or you will miss all that heavenly glory.”⁵

New Vajrayana students often tell me they love the teachings but don’t get on with other aspects of Asian culture – by which they mean reincarnation, deities, and the whole guru business. For them, Asian culture is synonymous with the Vajrayana, and this misconception tells me that they don’t understand the Vajrayana at all. With a little more study, the Vajrayana itself could dismantle all their objections and prejudices – if they studied it properly.

If your Vajrayana guru insists that the deities you visualize must look Tibetan, something is seriously amiss. It is true, Vajrayana deities do tend to have pig's heads, horse's heads, six arms, four legs and so on, but none of these forms are the product of Tibetan culture. How many Tibetans do you know with a pig's head and six arms? No one on this earth looks like that! And as a six-armed, pig-headed deity is not of this world, neither is it Tibetan. In fact it's beyond being Tibetan or not Tibetan and all the other worldly distinctions.

Can the Vajrayana symbolism and ritual practices found in Tibetan Buddhism work for non-Tibetans? For example, the elements of the Vajrayana that are found in the most basic teachings, like the Ngöndro. Is Vajrayana symbolism just a Tibetan thing?

Let's be absolutely clear about this: in the same way that the cup and the tea are two separate entities, Tibetan culture, tradition and custom are completely different from the Dharma. A teacup is more beautiful to look at than the tea it contains. A cup has a handle and sits in a saucer; you can touch, feel and use a cup. Tea cannot be drunk without a cup – or mug or a vessel of some kind. Like tea, we need a vessel from which to sip the Dharma, and this is why culture, tradition and custom are so necessary.

Human beings have always made use of symbols. From the Lion Capital of Ashoka to the stars and stripes of the American flag, the symbols we use are conditioned by our cultures. A red cross on a white background is the well-known emblem of the International Red Cross. But just twenty years after the organization was founded, Muslims raised strong objections to the logo because, to them, the cross is a Christian symbol. So a red crescent is now used in Islamic countries.

Wherever the Vajrayana is taught, it always makes use of local culture and symbolism in an effort to communicate its teachings to people from different cultural backgrounds. The common offering substances of flowers and perfume, for example, were imported into

Tibet from India, along with the more specifically Indian offering of foot-washing water. Tibetans rarely wash their bodies let alone their feet, yet they have always offered foot-washing water on their shrines. Why Indians bothered washing their feet and how they did it was a mystery to most Tibetans, but they never adjusted their offerings to suit their own experience and preferences.

The Vajrayana preliminary practices called *Ngöndro* include specific methods for doing prostrations and a ritual that involves making small heaps of rice to symbolize planets, the sun and the moon. To some contemporary non-Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, these practices look odd, and those practices that involve visualizing mandalas and refuge trees seem positively alien. It is therefore completely understandable that some Americans find a nine-day vipashyana meditation more homey and comforting, as well as less threatening and outlandish, than *Ngöndro*. So now, Buddhadharma's new host countries – in Europe, the Americas and so on – are beginning to develop their own simpler, more Zen-like Buddhist culture. Which is fine. I have no wish to discourage them. A cultural vessel can be a big help when it comes to serving up the Buddhist teachings. But Americans must be clear in their own minds that they are creating a new culture. They should also bear in mind that without crushing duality through practice, no matter how many times all the *Ngöndro* accumulations are repeated – ten, even twenty times – or how disciplined, simplified, Zen-like and culture-free their annual nine-day vipashyana retreat, their practice won't achieve much.

It could be argued that the concept of a guru lineage and the institutions that support that lineage are a product of Tibetan culture. If, however, you go further back in history, you will see that the concept of the guru lineage originated in India. The tradition I was born into sets great store by guru lineages and I was brought up to think twice before following a guru whose teachings appeared to have sprung up overnight.

A western woman once asked me if I liked Osho.

“Yes, I do.” I replied. “I like him very much. He’s witty, insightful and, although my perception of him is necessarily limited, he doesn’t sound like a hypocrite. I just have one problem with him: he never seems to talk about his guru or his guru’s guru and so on.”

The moment the words left my mouth, the woman’s face fell. She had been born into a culture that cherishes originality and ingenuity, so Osho’s lack of an acknowledged guru or lineage didn’t bother her at all.

You may think that as an atheist or an agnostic, or even better, a modernist, you are not affected by the hang-ups that grew out of your country’s archaic religions. But is that really true? Being ‘modernist’ doesn’t mean you have automatically shrugged off all trace of your national culture and habit. Native English-speaking atheists continue to use a language developed under the influence of Christian values. Language and literature have such a powerful effect on how native English speakers think that its influence is difficult to escape. Take, for example, the word ‘secular’. These days, so-called spiritual teachers fall over themselves to position their courses in secular territory by putting as much distance as they can between their own, ‘new’ teachings, and old, ‘outdated’ religious traditions. But according to the historian Tom Holland, there is no such thing as secularism. So much of the English language is coloured by Christian associations and rooted in Christian values that “Trace elements of Christianity continued to infuse people’s morals and presumptions so utterly that many failed even to detect their presence.”⁶

The spiritual path is a relatively new concept that was invented in the West. Originally, what we now call Buddhism and Daoism were simply a way of life. In India, for example, a Hindu tradition known as the *ashrama*^{7a} mapped out a human life in four stages: *brahmacharya* (single person, student); *grihastha* (married householder); *vanaprashtha* (forest dweller); *sannyasa* (renunciant, ascetic).

It is said that even kings and princes could hardly wait to become *vanaprastha* so that they could retire to a forest in order to seek the truth. Today, ash-clad sadhus are thought to be religious or holy men. Three thousand years ago, anyone who sat in a cave or in the middle of the forest or on the banks of the Ganges as they looked at their minds because they longed to discover the truth was respected in the same way we respect contemporary researchers and scientists. A sadhu's entire way of life was geared towards seeking the truth and very different from that of followers of 21st century spiritual paths. These great thinkers came to the conclusion that 'all compounded things are impermanent', which, when you think about it, is incredibly impressive. It's not an easy concept to grasp, let alone discover. We are now so used to hearing 'all compounded things are impermanent' that the impact of this truth is often lost on us. Two and half millennia ago, it was ground-breaking.

If the popular press is to be believed, an increasing number of modern scientists think religion is now irrelevant. They relegate a way of life that focuses exclusively on discovering the truth by experimenting with and observing one's own mind to the much-maligned category of 'religion'. This never used to be the case. The world's great astronomers spent their lives observing the moon and the planets and recorded everything they saw. The world's great sadhus sat in caves observing their own minds and recorded everything they discovered. Both disciplines were equally valued.

Today, the basket labelled 'spiritual path' contains far too many eggs. Tarot readings, astrology, massage, aromatherapy, crystal ball gazing and so on, are all popularly thought of as 'spiritual' activities, and Buddhism is now thrown into the same basket. But what does 'spiritual' really mean?

Let's suppose we have no choice but to use the term 'spiritual path'. How did Shakyamuni Buddha define the purpose of a 'spiritual path'? According to the Buddha, we follow a spiritual path to find out how we can discover the truth. What is the 'truth'? Well,

it turns out that the truth is neither exotic, nor mystical. The 'truth' is ridiculously simple: as long as there is duality, there can never be total satisfaction.

Never underestimate the power of culture and habit. It permeates everything we do and everything we don't do. The misinterpretations that arise between western students and Tibetan teachers can usually be traced back to a mutual lack of understanding of each other's culture. Throughout history, cultures have been defined by concepts of etiquette and social interaction, each developing a unique sense of humour, set of values and array of sensitivities. This may be why the majority of Tibetans have never understood French etiquette or English humour. Rather unfairly, Tibetan lamas judge westerners by Tibetan standards. When injis stretch their aching legs in a shrine room, they are considered impolite, even rude. The lamas forget that sitting cross-legged on the floor is not a western habit and that westerners are rarely aware of Tibetan shrine room etiquette. If the roles were reversed, it would be like a Tibetan lama walking into the throne room at Buckingham Palace, prostrating three times to the Queen, then sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Things are changing fast. What was polite last week is a deadly insult this week; what was politically correct yesterday will be politically incorrect by tomorrow. Social mores are constantly changing. Right now, 'moral outrage' is a common phenomenon. But whose morals are being outraged? Which religion is being affronted? The shifting sands of mutating sensitivities either reinforce our touchiness or desensitize us altogether, triggering yet another level of awkwardness and distress. Recently, after quite unconsciously stepping on other people's toes, I asked myself, should I give in to the ever-shifting goalposts of social convention? Should I constantly worry about unwittingly upsetting others? Surely there must be more to life than continually protecting one's own sensitivities and avoiding triggering the over-sensitivities of others?

As the guru-student relationship involves two individuals, it would run far more smoothly if both parties were to make the effort to learn what might upset the other, as well as what makes them laugh.

Tibetan Attitude to Women

One of the major flaws in Tibetan culture is its attitude to women. The world has never been fair to women and, much as I hate to admit it, the treatment of women in the Himalayan regions, particularly amongst Tibetans, has been and continues to be deplorable. And it seems to me that a sizeable chunk of Tibetan misogyny took root once the lamas had become the rulers of Tibet.

We human beings look up to people who successfully acquire power, money and influence. We admire them, take them as our role models and try to emulate them. We might, for example, take a photo of ourselves in a pastiche of a publicity shot favoured by our current role model. Like all human beings, Tibetans like to emulate their role models and often choose the same career path.

For the sake of argument, imagine what Tibet would have been like if laypeople, not lamas and monks, had run the country? Would the monasteries still have been seen as the nation's elite institutions? I doubt it. Ambitious young people would have had other options, including the possibility of aspiring to a secular alternative. Like everyone else in the modern world, Tibetans would have gossiped about fashion, style trends and new superfoods, and they would have sung songs about the musicians, soldiers, states people, scientists and actors they admired. Novels would have been written speculating about the lives of the popular and the famous. The Tibetans would have dressed like their heroes, had the same haircut, worn the same makeup and so on. But none of this happened because, for centuries,

the lamas ruled Tibet, and the lamas, monks, monasteries and the Dharma predominated.

I don't think Tibetans thought that women were intrinsically bad or a lower form of life or anything like that, but as the Vinaya states that monastics should avoid women, that is exactly what they did. Once the monks ruled Tibet and became the country's role models, their avoidance of women began to be seen as an expression of disdain. Over time, a contempt for women seeped into the minds of the Tibetan community and became the norm. The majority of lamas were celibate and the most highly respected monasteries and institutions were full of celibate monks, so it is hardly surprising that Tibet's celibate communities emphasized the practice of celibacy. But it's such a shame, even disheartening, that the lamas failed to bear in mind that lay Tibetans tend not to be celibate.

As a rule, Mahayana Buddhism teaches that men and women are equals – except the teachings that elevate women above men. Gender equality is clearly stated in the teachings, but in Tibet it was never highlighted or celebrated. The Prajnaparamita, one of the Mahayana's most important teachings, is often described as *yum* or 'mother'. One of the fourteen fundamental vows taken by Vajrayana practitioners is never in any way to disparage, denigrate or abuse women. If you break any one of the fourteen root vows of the Vajrayana and do not regret having broken it – meaning your regret leads you to confess and purify it – your journey along the Vajrayana path will be at an end. But in Tibet, gender equality has always been overshadowed by the monkish culture.

Please do not misunderstand me, I am not suggesting that every single Tibetan who consciously makes a vow of celibacy and follows the path of renunciation will always disparage or despise women. Neither am I saying that monks should now get married or be allowed to have sex. What I am saying is that according to the Buddhadharma, none of us should ever denigrate, abuse or harm any other sentient being, no matter what their gender – or species.

Buddhist monks are expected to follow the rules of the Vinaya. Just as boys who stay at boys-only hostels in Asia are told to steer clear of the girls-only hostels, the Vinaya's technique for overcoming the desire for carnal pleasure with the opposite sex is to forbid men who have a fervent wish to become bhikshus (Vinaya monks) to be alone with a woman. This instruction is about avoidance, not denigration, abuse, disparagement and so on. And the same goes for nuns; aspiring bhikshunis are also discouraged from hanging out with boys. It's the same rule for both genders. If a man or a woman chooses the life of a renunciant as a bhikshu or bhikshuni, they necessarily choose to renounce all aspects of worldly life. But making such a choice has absolutely nothing to do with the denigration or abuse of women.

Some Vinaya practitioners (monks and nuns who maintain the Vinaya vows) also practise the Vajrayana (and maintain Vajrayana samayas). For them, to avoid another being because they are supposedly impure or imperfect would utterly contradict their Vajrayana samayas.

I grew up in the same neighbourhood as an exemplary monk called Lama Gelek. He was a genuinely good bhikshu and exactly the kind of model monastic that my friends and I loved to tease – we were very naughty. As a monk, he knew he should never be alone with a woman and panicked if there was the slightest chance it might happen. At the same time, Lama Gelek's attendant, who is still alive, told me that he offered tsok daily and had it secretly distributed to several women. I myself noticed the tsok distribution, but it was a long time before I managed to persuade Lama Gelek to explain what he was doing.

"As a Buddhist practitioner," he said, "I try to do all the practices – Shravakayana, Bodhisattvayana and Vajrayana. I do not hold wrong views about women but, as a monk, the Vinaya tells me that I must never be alone with a woman in case she triggers the emotion of desire in me. The trouble is that being paranoid about my monk's vows sometimes leads me to act inappropriately, which is not right!

Women are none other than dakinis and being paranoid about being alone with them does my samaya no good at all. So I purify my broken samayas through tsok practice.” Lama Gelek set an excellent example.

You might be surprised by just how many people practise all three yanas as Lama Gelek did. Outwardly they abide by the Vinaya of the Shravakayana, inwardly they arouse the bodhichitta of the Mahayana, and secretly they practise the Vajrayana.

Tibetan Buddhist Hierarchy

Although all forms of hierarchy are anathema to the Vajrayana, over the centuries, Tibetan Buddhism has developed a ranking system. No matter what the context is, distinctions of any kind, including the idea that one person is born higher or lower than another, have nothing whatsoever to do with Buddhism or the Vajrayana. But human beings love social order, along with all the pomp and circumstance that goes with it, and the Tibetans are no exception. In fact, the Tibetan obsession with who gets the highest throne and by how many inches, and the privileges a lama’s family members expect – even second cousins twice removed – is, for many of us, excruciatingly embarrassing. But as far as the Dharma is concerned, there is no official hierarchy. If there is a pecking order, it is only ever based on who has heard the most Dharma and accomplished the most practice. The Vinaya, for example, merely advises monks to respect those who were ordained before them. The only ‘rank’ recognized by the Vajrayana is ‘guru’. And the guru is everything.

For a student, the point of practising the Vajrayana is to learn to see your tantric guru as a buddha, and the tantric guru’s job is to ensure that each student becomes the equal of the Buddha. In other words, the guru’s job is to ensure that all his students are promoted to his own level. Nevertheless, while we are on the path, as a practice of

humility and offering we venerate the gurus that we ourselves place on the highest seats. In some of our visualizations, we visualize the guru on the top of our head because the crown chakra is thought to be our bodies' highest 'seat'. In other visualizations, the guru appears in our heart, and sometimes we bow down to our guru's lotus feet. It's all part of the practice.

The ranks and hierarchical systems we hear about in Tibetan Buddhism – higher and lower thrones and so on – were created by human minds and institutionalized by the Tibetans. In the same way that the president of the United States has a better chance of saving the planet than an unnamed wrangler in Montana, the hierarchies created by the Tibetan Buddhist system made it possible for the lamas to accomplish a great deal of good. But even a US president's power is limited by the American constitution, which is designed to ensure that the president cannot unilaterally do whatever he or she likes.

One of the big disadvantages of being the US president is that you are limited by the social expectations projected onto the office. Similarly, high-ranking Tibetan Buddhist masters are expected to discharge a wide range of responsibilities that have nothing to do with Buddhism and which often land them in awkward situations. These days, more and more lineage holders and high-ranking, famous lamas are forced to kowtow to the values and definitions of the changing times. But if a tantric master were ever to kowtow to the constantly shifting ideals of political correctness, it would not only be the death of the tantric master, but also of tantric lineages and tantric practitioners. This is why the great lamas of the past prayed never to be reborn as high-ranking or famous lamas. I am pretty certain that at least 80% of the gurus named in the tantric guru lineages held no rank or worldly position whatsoever. Only very recently – after 1959 – have titles like 'head of lineage' been considered necessary.

Fame and a high rank are not among the list of qualifications required by a Vajrayana guru. However, from a worldly point of

view, students often regard highly respected, famous masters as a safe bet. All famous people are aware of their approval ratings. Even Vajrayana gurus may avoid behaving badly because they want to live up to their public image and good name. But fame and a good reputation in no way guarantee that a lama will be a good Vajrayana master. Famous people constantly protect their own image by saying what they think the public wants to hear. To maintain a spotless reputation, famous masters, whose moral compass must be seen to be irreproachable, often end up saying things they don't really mean.

Almost all the tantric masters of the past did their best to live under the radar. This approach worked remarkably well in Tibet and India but is virtually impossible to accomplish in the modern world. Even so, it's important that we all know how tantra used to be taught.

All this matters. Today's students do very little 'hearing and contemplation'. The moment a student meets a guru they like, they instantly consider her to be their guru. As they have already decided that they like this guru, they don't do any homework, they don't research the guru's reputation and background, and they don't listen to and contemplate the relevant Dharma teachings. Instead, they thoughtlessly pin all their hopes on one person. That person may well be a very good lama, but one day their human flaws will be exposed – it's inevitable. Even a perfect guru can be criticized because gurus are also human beings. Their students are also human. And, as we all constantly make assumptions based on our own unique expectations, it is almost inevitable that a human student will end up finding fault with a human guru.

Should Buddhadharma Be Updated?

FROM WHAT I have seen, modern minds that are strongly influenced by contemporary western culture often think that the updated version of anything, from phone apps to fashion, is the best. But that may just be my own prejudice. If an update of the Buddha's Dharma genuinely benefited sentient beings, I would, of course, rejoice. But never forget that once an update has been fully installed, the original programme becomes obsolete and is usually deleted.

While I am the first to advocate the use of innovative, skilful and easier to understand ways or methods of presenting the Dharma to contemporary students – please note that 'ways or methods' is underlined – the fundamental principles of Buddhadharma cannot and should not be adjusted in any way whatsoever. Buddha himself advised long ago that the Dharma should always be taught using methods that suit the time and place. Never once did he even suggest that if the world altered course and people started thinking differently, the core principles of Buddhadharma could, under any circumstances, be changed.

One of Buddha's fundamental teachings is that 'all compounded things are impermanent'. This teaching cannot be changed, but the way it is taught can be adapted to suit the capacities of contemporary students, on condition that the students are capable of biting off, chewing, swallowing and accepting its wisdom. The teacher might, for example, present the changing seasons as an example of impermanence. Once the student accepts this obvious truth and is ready to take the next step, the teacher could gently introduce the idea that when the student dies, their body, which is a compounded phenomenon, will disintegrate. By doing so, the teacher opens the

door to a discussion about death. Having swallowed and digested the teachings on death, the student might then be introduced to the more subtle compounded phenomena of our thoughts, which are also impermanent. This is one of many methods for introducing students to impermanence. But no matter which approach is used, the end result must be that the student has a complete and thorough understanding of ‘all compounded things are impermanent’. And I repeat, the fundamental teaching *cannot* and *must not* be altered.

The Vajradhara – the name Vajrayana students use for the Buddha – said that everything is a deity. From the bubbles on the surface of a pond to a snow mountain, from a maggot to the family who lives in Buckingham Palace, everything is a deity, including you, the practitioner. To introduce you to this idea, your teacher might first ask you to consider that your skin is not its usual colour but emerald green. Once you are used to your emerald green skin, she will ask you to imagine that you have four arms. When you are ready to hear it, she will ask you to visualize yourself as a pig-headed deity with a consort surrounded by a retinue of deities and to consider all these deities to be you. Eventually, she will tell you that everything you have visualized and imagined is an illusion. One head, two thousand heads, emerald skin or a multi-coloured skin are all fabrications made by the mind, whereas the unfabricated state is the actual deity. Throughout this exercise, the basic teaching that everything is a deity *cannot* and *must not* be changed.

The Vajradhara repeated again and again that, having made all the proper preparations and received the highest tantric teachings from your Vajrayana guru, you must not only see her as the Buddha, but she must be even more important to you than the Buddha. And as your guru *is* the Buddha, you must do whatever she says.

Another approach your teacher might take is to advise you to relate to her as you would a kind, informative professor. Later, when you are ready, she might say that, if you continue to think of her as an ordinary person, you will not progress spiritually, and so you

should start training yourself to see her as an emerald green being. She might also ask you to see ‘her’ as ‘him’ – if your guru is a man, you may have to think of ‘him’ as ‘her’. Eventually, if your teacher is smart, she will lead you to the realisation that she is none other than your mind, the nature of which is the Buddha. *This teaching cannot and must not be changed.*

For a guru to expect a student to see him as the Buddha from the moment they meet and to unquestioningly do everything he commands is like putting a learner driver behind the wheel of a Formula One racing car for his first lesson. By doing so, the guru, whom the student trusts more than anyone in the world, risks devastation and ruination for both of them. The tantric texts all say that only once a student has reached the first bhumi will they genuinely be able to see the guru as a buddha – and a first bhumi dude wouldn’t think twice about doing exactly as the guru asked. If you aspire to realise the truth, you must train your mind to see the guru as the Buddha, in the same way a learner driver who aspires to become a Formula One champion must first learn to drive a Mini. Always bear in mind that aspiration is the key.

As you know, reports about the behaviour of several lamas recently led to their downfall, prompting calls for the Vajrayana to be adjusted to comply with 21st century popular opinion and expectations. Although none of my colleagues explicitly condoned this idea, many failed to disagree. But no matter how learned, popular, celebrated or high ranking a lama may be, none of us can change one word of the Buddha’s fundamental teachings and continue to call it Buddhism. However small the adjustment, it would not be Buddhism. Teachers are free to teach whatever they like – who can stop them? But if they do not teach Vajrayana students to see their guru as a perfect being, they cannot claim to be teaching tantra. Nothing in the tantric system indicates that a lama can even suggest that it is possible to follow the Vajrayana path without striving to see the lama as the Buddha. Similarly, nothing in the vipashyana teachings indicates

that a teacher can claim to teach impermanence (*aniccā*) if she also accepts that even one of her student's issues is permanent. Any changes to the Word of the Buddha, at any time and for whatever reason – even if a consensus of opinion insists that it is morally or ethically inappropriate – will result in a new and different system that can no longer be called Buddhism.

Ironically – and this really intrigues me – Tibetans have long been roundly criticised for their feudal culture and for perpetuating the cult of the guru. Yet the very critics who railed against the power of gurus for decades, now expect high and well-known lamas, including myself, to endorse the view that the Vajrayana can be adapted to suit 21st century sensibilities. On the one hand, they remonstrate against what they interpret to be the 'cult of the guru', and on the other, they expect gurus like me to accept responsibility for changing the Buddha's core teachings. In Tibetan terms, it's as if, based on their own mistaken assumption that I have the authority to change the Vajrayana, they want to enthrone me as their feudal lord. I'm baffled by this – even discombobulated, as my American friends might say.

The Coca Cola Story

The Buddhist path is made up of two indispensable and inseparable ingredients: wisdom and skilful methods.

In this example, the truth (wisdom) is that Coca Cola (Buddhism) is full of sugar (everything that binds us to *samsara*). Imagine a town that relies entirely on Coca Cola for everything. The livelihood, communal values, benchmarks, culture, even the hopes and dreams of everyone in town are tied up with the production and distribution of Coca Cola. Everyone in town drinks a great deal of Coke, so much so that obesity and diabetes are destroying their health.

As a health education expert, you have been given the job of explaining to the townsfolk that for the sake of their health, they

should give up sugar completely. You must therefore point out the truth about Coke, which is that it contains a great deal of sugar. It's a big challenge. A few townsfolk respond positively and immediately stop drinking Coke, but most don't. So you apply the skilful method of suggesting that they reduce their sugar intake by drinking one less bottle of Coke a day. This method does not validate all the other bottles of Coke they drink and nothing you say or do suggests that any amount of Coke is healthy, it simply helps the townsfolk take a step in the right direction.

Asking the townsfolk to reduce their Coke intake is just part of the story you tell them in the hope that eventually they will give it up altogether. Similarly, meditating with a straight back is just part of the story told by your teacher that will eventually lead to your enlightenment. We can only talk about the truth using stories like the Buddhist story and the Coke story. The Buddhist story eventually leads students to purify their perception by visualizing a six-armed deity. Then, in an unexpected plot twist, it points out the truth that even visualization practice is a fabrication and just another part of the story.

All spiritual systems adopt disciplines. Dharma students start by sitting with a straight back as they meditate. Some go on to avoid eating meat or drinking alcohol and some become renunciants. Those who step onto the Vajrayana path learn to visualize themselves as a deity and come to realise that not eating meat is as big a mistake as eating it.

You, the health expert, apply all these disciplines in an attempt to reduce the Coca Cola townsfolk's sugar intake. But in the end, the sugar-laden Coke itself will have to go.

Buddhism works by applying both wisdom and skilful methods; if that counts as morality, ethics, and so on, then so be it. As you apply wisdom and skilful methods, if you forget or fail to present the truth – that Coca Cola is full of sugar – you are no longer teaching Buddhism.

The terms ‘wisdom’ and ‘method’ are important to those who have yet to awaken to the truth and to the distinctions made between them throughout our study of Buddhism. But these distinctions are merely tools, not the ‘truth’. Once we reach our goal of enlightenment (nirvana), such distinctions will seem arbitrary.

The guru, the individual who teaches and guides us, is just one of the Vajrayana’s infinite methods, but from the Vajrayana’s point of view, the most important. At times we are told “your wisdom mind is your guru”, but we are also advised to “rely on the Dharma, not the person who teaches it”. No matter how often we make a point of reminding ourselves that we should rely on the Dharma not the individual who teaches it – which, again, Buddha himself advised – human nature is such that when a person misbehaves we forget this advice, blame the teaching, and end up throwing the Dharma baby out with the misbehaving bathwater.

SIX

Lost in Translation

AS WE HAVE already seen, the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, originated in India and then migrated throughout the world. The Dharma has never been defined by just one national culture, but it has absorbed a few of the habits of the peoples who imported it into their countries. After its introduction into Tibet, Buddhadharma was assimilated so completely into the fabric of Tibetan life that the Tibetans forgot it was an import. This may be why it has never occurred to them that a knowledge of Tibetan culture is entirely unnecessary to a Japanese, American, European or Australian Buddhist student who wants to practise the Dharma – unless, that is, they are doing a Ph.D. in Tibetology. The idea that westerners follow lamas for the Dharma, not the culture, has probably never entered the heads of most Tibetans.

Over the past sixty years, many Himalayan natives have been educated outside their traditional school system. They have therefore never studied classical Tibetan and cannot make sense of Tibetan texts. This is why many young Tibetans prefer to study the Dharma in English. The lamas should therefore make sure they introduce these young Tibetans, Nepalis, Bhutanese and so on, to Buddhism's basic teachings, like the Four Noble Truths, and practices like mindfulness. But they don't. Instead, the younger generation are led to believe that all you have to do to be a Buddhist is light butter lamps and circumambulate stupas. So, not only have the lamas failed to examine the needs of modern non-Tibetan Dharma students, they have also overlooked an entire generation of young Tibetans.

Recently, I have begun to realise just how much of the Buddha's teachings has been lost in translation and can think of several reasons

why this has happened. Both the failure of the Tibetan lamas and their students to understand each other's cultural cues, and the lamas' lack of awareness of the power of language have played a big part. Plus, Tibetan opportunism. Too many Tibetan lamas take their western students for a ride and teach them Tibetan culture not the Buddha's Dharma. I can understand why. The lamas are so self-absorbed and preoccupied with preserving Tibetanness that they fail to notice the great potential westerners have as vessels for the Dharma. As far as I can see, the upshot is that although the lamas have done a fairly good job of preserving Tibetan culture and traditions, they have been far less successful at safeguarding the Dharma.

Cultural Cues

One evening in New York, a girl who knows nothing about Buddhism walks into a Dharma centre. She is immediately intrigued by the sight of an Asian man sitting on a high throne. She feels drawn to this man and fascinated by his mystical, spiritual aura, but she is utterly mystified by his throne. Why does he have to sit so high up? The Asian man (the Tibetan lama) sits on a high throne because he grew up believing that the higher a person sits, the more precious and highly valued his words will be – in this case the words of the Dharma. Obviously, this cultural cue makes sense to Tibetans, but it is completely lost on the curious American girl.

An Asian lama arrives at a Dutch university to give a talk. He's not alone. His retinue of consorts, attendants, secretaries, personal doctor, chef and masseuse walk in procession behind him, followed by a gaggle of hangers-on. Tomasz, Dick and Harriet are in the audience. They have attended the talk because they are genuinely interested in Buddhadharma, particularly in the Tibetan Buddhist view of non-duality, and the sight of the entourage puzzles them.

Harriet is disturbed by it because, at best, the lama looks more like a famous rapper than a philosopher, and at worst, he looks like a cult leader. None of Tomasz, Dick or Harriet's other professors have ever entered the lecture hall to a fanfare of trumpets, accompanied by dozens of teaching assistants, secretaries and physical therapists.

In Asia, things are quite different. Quite a few Asian cultures expect a lama, especially a Rinpoche, to travel with an entourage. For them, an attentive retinue adds to the atmosphere of awe and grandeur that has traditionally surrounded great masters. To a western eye, all that fuss makes the lama seem a little pompous, even comical. Typically, though, most westerners couldn't care less. Westerners value privacy and like to extend that courtesy to their gurus, which may be why they prefer their gurus to travel solo. And I think it's true to say that people in the West are often suspicious of anyone who seems incapable of spending time alone.

In France, a visiting Tibetan lama has been asked to talk to a beginners' mindfulness group. To validate his lineage's credentials, the first thing he does is reel off a whole string of incomprehensible Tibetan names. Not one of the new mindfulness students understands what he is doing, neither can they guess what any of the unpronounceable names have to do with their practice. The Tibetan lamas' habit of invoking previous incarnations is another often misunderstood Tibetan cultural cue; it works perfectly within the Tibetan minds that created it, but utterly bewilders Tomasz, Dick, Harriet, the American girl and the French mindfulness group. When the lama goes on to announce with great pride that in his previous incarnation he had been a Buddhist deity called Manjushri, all he sees are blank faces. It's like a western nurse telling villagers in a remote part of East Bhutan that she is the reincarnation of Florence Nightingale.

In the Himalayas, it is customary for supplicants to make offerings to the lamas they visit and Tibetan lamas expect their

western students to do the same. They don't know what to make of western students who visit them empty-handed because they don't understand that making offerings in this way is not part of western culture. Neither do they realise that westerners are told that lamas teach the wisdom of Dharma out of compassion, not for money. In fact, if westerners are asked for money in exchange for teachings or prayers or anything 'spiritual', most assume they are being conned. The lamas don't understand that in the West, once money has changed hands – for example, the mandatory offering that accompanies a request for prayers – a legal transaction has taken place that instantly changes the character of the relationship between guru and student. From the tantric point of view, the student 'pays' for all the guru does by offering themselves, body, speech and mind. But in a western context, a guru who asks for payment to say prayers is in danger of being treated like any other service industry. His students may start to complain when his prayers don't work, and some may even ask for their money back.

Each nationality's emotional reactions and responses will vary depending on their cultural and religious habits. Tibetans, like most Asians, come from a face-saving culture, whereas westerners tend to be inhibited by culturally conditioned feelings of guilt and existential angst. I once heard a depressed western student try to talk to her Tibetan teacher about the debilitating guilt she felt about having a job, food on the table and a roof over her head while so many are homeless and dying from hunger and thirst.

"You are kind to think of others," said her teacher, who had no idea what the woman was talking about. For him, and for most Tibetan lamas, feelings of guilt are what cause us to purify and confess, which makes guilt quite a useful emotion on the spiritual path. The idea that anyone might feel guilty about living comfortably while others have nothing was entirely alien to him. "If you have no sense of guilt, there is no basis for your spiritual path."

Few lamas are aware that those who listen to their teachings come from a variety of family backgrounds and social groups. They have never understood that the lasting effects of childhood trauma, or physical or sexual abuse have a big impact on how students relate to their lama. So when a victim of abuse approaches a lama in the hope of finding peace or solace, wouldn't it help if that lama knew something about trauma, racial prejudice and abuse? And what about sexual orientation? Tibetan lamas need to know that sometimes a person born in a male body feels emotionally and psychologically female, and vice versa. The lamas need to know that it's not a disease, it's a preference – like preferring tea to coffee.

After all these years, I myself have failed to pinpoint the root of some of my students' suffering – I just don't know where it comes from. But do I need to? Do I need to know exactly how or why a student suffers? Perhaps it's enough just to know that there is something behind a student's suffering. If, at the very least, the lamas would simply recognize that each and every student comes from a different national, cultural, social, religious and intellectual background, it would go a long way towards establishing a better mutual understanding.

Learning the cultural cues common to each country takes time. Clearing up misunderstandings and misapprehensions also takes time, not to mention a great deal of patience. So we must all bear in mind that the Dharma, Buddhism, has only recently begun to take root in the West and that it still has a very long way to go.

The Power of Language

About a decade ago, I taught at one of Oxford University's colleges for a semester, and only then did I realise that the study of religion in many of the great western universities includes the study of the

associated languages. Oxford Dons put a great deal of thought into their courses and their insistence on the study of a religion's primary languages sounds sensible. But the fact remains that Sanskrit, Pali and Classical Tibetan are outdated, archaic and almost useless outside a university setting. The job prospects for a fluent Sanskrit speaker are virtually zero – from the employability perspective, you would be far better off learning simplified Chinese.

Buddhism is now taught in several modern languages. This is a fact of modern life that all Buddhists need to be aware of, not just Tibetan Buddhists. I recently browsed through a Pali chant book. It was a bit like reading a 19th century Christian hymnal. That was when I realised how urgently we need to redefine the English translations of many of the terms we use today. If I were the Kim Jong-Il of Buddhism, I would ban words like 'compassion', 'enlightenment', 'devotion' etc. on my first day in office.

Language is also a problem for the Tibetans. As I have already mentioned, many of today's younger generation were not educated in Tibetan-run schools, but at places like Dr Graham's High School in Kalimpong, and St Joseph's School, North Point, where all the lessons are in English. Although these young people are Buddhist, their understanding of 'good' and 'bad' is quite different from that of their parents and grandparents who did not receive a British-sponsored education. And I am quite sure that the Tibetans who grew up in China in the 1970s and 1980s have yet another understanding of these words.

It's high time that all the Tibetan lamas learned how to communicate effectively both with westerners and the Tibetans whose education and cultural conditioning is so different from their own. I doubt that many of the lamas teaching in the West today have even attempted to read popular literature – J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, for example, or any of the great literary classics like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great*

Gatsby. Even a lama with reasonably fluent English wouldn't have a hope of translating *Sense and Sensibility* into Tibetan. The problem isn't that the Tibetan language lacks the words to describe how a family has to downsize after the father dies, it's that lamas have no conception of the culturally unique layers of meaning hidden behind each of Jane Austen's words.

If only the lamas currently teaching Dharma in English had some inkling of the misunderstandings and assumptions made by educated English minds as they listen to a Madhyamika teaching, or by those for whom English is a second or third language. The majority of lamas have no idea that words like 'compassion', 'self', and therefore 'selfless', 'love', 'non-violence', 'hell', 'vow', 'breakage', 'temptation' and 'enlightenment' can be heard differently, depending on the education, nationality and cultural background of the person listening.

In a religious context, the cultural baggage that weighs down such words can make them quite dangerous. Words like 'selfish' and 'selfless' for example. To many native English speakers, 'self' brings with it the idea of a 'soul', making the quite different Buddhist use of 'self' confusing. For Buddhists, 'self' is a label, just like 'Coca-Cola' is a label, the difference being that the 'Coca-Cola' label can be printed on a bottle or a can, whereas the label 'self' has nothing to attach itself to. If you had a label with 'self' written on it right now, where would you put it? On your toe? Your finger? A feeling? The focal point of 'self' changes all the time; it's transitory, ever-moving and ever-changing. There is therefore no one spot onto which you can definitively paste the label 'self'. It's a very subtle point.

Like Buddhists, Christians try to avoid being 'selfish' and to promote 'selfless' action. In that context, 'selfless' means 'not being selfish'. So, when a native English speaker receives a Buddhist teaching that includes the word 'selflessness' – a common translation of the Pali term *anattā* – what do they hear? And if 'self' also implies

a person's 'soul', would being 'selfless' lead to nihilism? The same goes for 'emptiness', which in English implies that although a vessel may now be empty, it was once full.

During my European tour of Rigpa Centres in 2018, a man who had been offended by my use of the word 'crush' posted a comment on social media. I used the word 'crush' in the context of it being the guru's job to crush a student's ego. The man said that this term does not exist in the Buddhist teachings. In a way, that is true: 'crush' is not a politically correct translation of the original Sanskrit. He went on to say that as Buddhists believe there is no such thing as a 'self', there is nothing to crush. And of course, he is right. I completely agree. But I would add that it is by recognizing that there is no ego in the first place that we crush that ego. In other words, we crush ego by realising there is nothing to crush. To those who grew up in a culture that lacks the concept of 'selflessness' (*anattā*), 'crushing ego' is often interpreted as shattering a person's confidence or self-esteem. If there were such a thing as a truly existing ego, to crush it would certainly be an act of abuse. But there is no ego to crush.

Chanting in modern languages is another aspect of language that has yet to be addressed. Tibetan lamas have made their students chant and recite practices in Tibetan for decades, with transliterations provided in Roman script so that students can recite the words parrot-fashion. Personally, I think it is much better for students to know what they are saying as they practise and recently pushed hard for drupchens and drupchös to be performed in English. But whenever I participate in ceremonies at western Dharma events, it's usually the westerners themselves – especially those who have been marinating in Tibetanness the longest – who insist that group practices are done in Tibetan.

I once asked some highly respected lamas, none of whom were fluent in English, to read aloud a phonetic version of a Shakespeare sonnet. I then asked for their reactions. "It feels ridiculous!" they said. "What's the point? Why did you make us do it?" These are

the very lamas who have not even begun to think about how to make it possible for students to chant in their own languages, or to encourage the translation of practice texts with rhyme and meter so that students can chant or sing them.

Western Fascination with Tibetan Exoticism

Another facet that has contributed to much of the miscommunication between Tibetan lamas and their foreign students is the western fascination with Tibetan exoticism. For some, Tibetan ritual implements, colourful clothing, incense, art, etc. are a bigger draw than the Dharma itself. On top of which, as Tibetan culture is thought to be endangered, many concerned westerners are keen to offer their help and support. All these factors play a role. Not realising that Tibetan culture is not the Dharma, many westerners prefer to support the preservation of Tibetan culture rather than to study and practise the Dharma. But if teachers really care about the liberation of their students, they should know that teaching courses on how to fold a traditional white scarf is not enough. An English language teacher would never stop teaching his Tibetan students irregular verbs in favour of drilling them in how to drink English tea from porcelain cups – with their pinkies crooked just so. And the teacher would never insist that, from then on, every cup of tea should be drunk in exactly the same way. English teachers teach the English language, not old English habits.

Part of the problem is that not all of today's Tibetan teachers have received a thorough Dharma education and a surprising number don't know how to teach. For them, repeating the quintessential Buddhist teachings on shunyata, dependent arising, and so on, over and over again, is difficult and tedious, so instead, they teach Tibetan cultural habits dressed up as Buddhadharma.

Teaching isn't easy. Often the most crucial aspect of a skill or philosophy is the least tangible and most difficult to convey. For example, before you even pick up a camera, you need to know how to look at the subject you are photographing. But how do you teach someone how to look? It's much easier to show students how to set up a camera, which shutter speed and F-stop to choose, and to pass on a few of the practical dos and don'ts of photography. Students love that kind of thing. Similarly, it's harder to teach shunyata than how to fold a white scarf or make a tormo. This is why some Tibetan teachers focus their instructions on how to set up a Tibetan shrine, and by doing so, they lead their students to believe that the arrangement of a shrine is a crucial aspect of Tibetan Buddhism. It's like saying you will only become a great photographer if you know the difference between Fuji and Sony cameras. Students like to be taught practical skills that can be applied quickly and produce tangible results. They like knowing how to arrange and fill seven offering bowls on a shrine. Mastering the art of chanting prayers in Tibetan gives them confidence – and kudos. They like to feel they have learned their lessons well and that they know what they are doing. But it's almost impossible to see the result of teachings on shunyata and dependent arising, because it is so elusive and almost always inexpressible.

Initially, western students probably went looking for the Dharma for spiritual reasons. But after a while, their preoccupation with Tibetan traditions – the bright colours, rich fabrics and preternatural ritual implements – distracted them from Buddhadharma's main goal, which is enlightenment. Recognizing this, rather than giving students a crash course on how to adopt Tibetan habits, a kind and compassionate teacher will always guide students towards a course of study and practice that leads to liberation.

Fortunately, as westerners now know a great deal more about Buddhadharma than they did in the 1960s and 70s, fewer Tibetan lamas are able to hoodwink them with classes in Tibetanness. In

fact, an astonishing number of westerners know more about the Dharma than Tibetan khenpos and lamas, so the wool can no longer be pulled over their eyes – although some lamas are bound to try. As a result, Tibetan Buddhism is no longer the enigmatic, mystical adventure it once was and its novelty is beginning to wear off – which is probably a good thing.

None of the problems I have mentioned here are easy to solve, but I do believe that talking openly about it all is a good start.

Of Inspiration and Rationale

IN 2014, I began to realise that something wasn't quite right in the Vajrayana world. Alarming gossip involving Vajrayana gurus was circulating and I began to worry that the metaphorical Vajrayana baby was about to get thrown out with the scandal-infested bathwater.

The exposés that led to Sogyal Rinpoche's downfall were published in 2017. This was not the first time a prominent Vajrayana guru had been named in a public scandal. In Tibet, shocking revelations about lamas were a regular feature of life, and the offences were committed on a much larger scale. Although the Tibetans had no access to social media (which had yet to be invented), gossip that had anything at all to do with misuse of power, money and sex would magnetize disgrace and dishonour, instantly ruining reputations. I don't have to tell any of you how that works.

Our fundamental problem is that we are all human beings. As human beings, we are deluded and, more often than not, have no choice but to rely on systems that were created for us by other deluded human beings. It is now virtually impossible to avoid using other people's systems, methods and paths in order to accomplish our chosen goals. But as Buddha Maitreya pointed out, although some form of spiritual system is indispensable to those who seek enlightenment, that very path can only ever be flawed.

Buddhism may well be the only spiritual system in the world that tells its followers that their path – the Buddhist path – is not perfect and must eventually be discarded. In the context of a philosophical debate with nerdy, argumentative philosophers – especially those who sip nuclear grade coffee on the south bank of the Seine – such a statement sounds extremely impressive. It's only when we are alone

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Because it has to be discarded,
Because it is inconstant by nature,
Because they do not have,
Because they are afraid,
The Dharma in its two aspects and the Sangha
Are not the ultimate refuge.

Arya Maitreya
Uttaratantrashastra^{7b}

with our practice that we begin to realise just how attached to our path and all its many systems we really are. And this is as it should be. As Buddhists, we should believe in and care about our spiritual path. The boat that ferries us across the ocean is not our ultimate destination, but travellers must remain loyal to their boat until they reach the other shore. Only a fool would scuttle her own boat.

Power, Money and Sex

Whenever two deluded beings form a relationship, there will always be an imbalance of personal power; one of you is bound to be more powerful and assertive than the other. But however brave and able to stand up for yourself you may be, at times, you will choose to submit to another person's will. Why stand your ground when the result could be devastating personal loss? Especially if relinquishing your own power right now promises rich rewards in the future. This is how all teacher-student relationships usually work, no matter what the context.

Individuals who enjoy public acclaim and respect are usually also extremely influential. Over the centuries, a small number of Tibetan lamas were handed a great deal of power, while the majority did their best to avoid high spiritual and political office altogether. For most lamas, the biggest drawback to holding a powerful position was the inevitable loss of their personal freedom. Many stories are told about the lengths lamas went to in an effort to escape that kind of life. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, for example, avoided the honour of being elevated to the position of a Shabdrung of Ngor monastery – a very powerful Sakya monastery – by slipping away in the dead of night on the eve of the ceremony. On another occasion, a rumour reached Khyentse Wangpo's ears that the King of Derge was looking for an excellent calligrapher to be his secretary. Determined to avoid becoming one of the king's chattels, Khyentse Wangpo, who was

a master calligrapher, deliberately destroyed all his most beautiful work and started writing in an illegible script that made it look as if a spider had walked across the page.

It's a fact of life that some people are born leaders and others are born followers. Buddhists put this down to karma. When a group of friends decides to go on a picnic, the born leader will jump into action and tell the others who should make the sandwiches, who should bring the potato salad, who should provide the blankets and so on. It makes sense; a good organizer can save everyone a great deal of time and money. This is even so amongst anarchists; one anarchist is bound to be more powerful and assertive than the others. But there is also a downside. The power that comes with an ability to orchestrate groups is easy to corrupt and too often becomes abusive. Many romantic dreamers long for a world without rules, laws or authorities. At first hearing, it sounds like paradise, doesn't it? Until we remember that it is often the dreamers who become dictators, as they force entire nations to obey their rules just so that they can live their dream.

In Tibet, a few spiritually powerful lamas combined their spiritual role with that of head of a large network of monasteries and, by doing so, were often able to wield considerable administrative and political power. But history tells us that the exercise of political power by Tibet's religious leaders was the cause of tremendous suffering throughout the country. It might be interesting for you to find out more about this aspect of Tibetan history. But please don't focus all your attention on the relatively small number of corrupt lamas. If you can separate the Dharma from the practitioner, you will see that the vast majority of lamas dedicated their lives to benefiting others and practising the Dharma. Many inspiring stories are told about how courageous spiritual practitioners stood up to corrupt Tibetan politicians that may help you demystify Tibetan history.

Monasteries in Tibet were responsible for upholding, preserving and propagating their own traditions and lineages of teachings. So it was their job to found schools, centres, libraries, endowments

and scholarships. But just as power corrupts, so does proximity to large sums of money, and money is far more likely to appeal to a follower of the Buddha than power. Not everyone needs or wants to be at the helm of a multinational corporation, but we all have to pay our bills. And how much is ‘enough’? It’s such a blurry, mysterious, unquantifiable concept. Even billionaires never seem to have enough.

Buddhism has always relied on powerful political and financial support to help propagate the Dharma. Without it, the Buddha’s teachings may not have spread so widely. Buddhadharmā’s Indian heyday, for example, fell roughly between the 4th and 12th centuries C.E., when the Gupta and Pala dynasties – both generous patrons of Buddhadharmā – held the reigns of political power. Historians believe that one reason (not the only reason) both the Buddhist and Jain traditions dwindled in India was that, compared with the world’s more dominant religions, they simply didn’t have enough money. In this world, money is a necessary evil that none of us can do without.

The Buddha’s teachings on ‘right livelihood’ are part of the Buddhist eight-fold noble path. This teaching clearly sets out what all Buddhists should bear in mind when it comes to earning a living. Buddhist monks and yogis are not supposed to have savings. The Vinaya also stipulates that monks must beg for food and only eat what they are given that day. Yogis are advised to do the same. As a child, I always felt such joy when I caught sight of the monks and yogis who regularly came to our house to beg. I would rush to the kitchen to fetch food that had been set aside to place in their bowls. Just remembering those times warms my heart. It’s very different these days. Imagine the reception a Buddhist monk would get if he tried to beg on London’s Bond Street. The tradition of begging is still practised in some Theravadin countries, where monks begging for their daily meal is one of the most beautiful sights to be seen. But sadly, it’s waning.

Buddhism has almost always relied on money and power to support its teaching and practice, but it has never relied on sex. Sex

is not one of Buddhadharma's 'bare necessities'. We can practise the Dharma without ever having sex, but monasteries would never be built and books would never get printed without the help of powerful supporters and their money.

Today, everyone swaps stories about sex in Vajrayana Buddhism, hyping it up to such a degree that both the sexual act and Vajrayana practitioners' attitude to sex have become the Vajrayana's most talked about dilemmas.

Whatever the situation, sexual abuse is always wrong. The Vajrayana has never and will never make excuses for Vajrayana teachers who force students to do anything they don't want to. In Buddhism, sexual abuse comes under the category of 'harm' and all Vajrayana practitioners are supposed to avoid inflicting harm on others. But just because one lama is abusive, it doesn't follow that the entire lineage are all abusers. The damage done by sexual abuse is personal. The victim suffers emotionally, mentally and physically and, if the sexual abuser is caught, he suffers condemnation, reproof and sometimes imprisonment. Both his reputation and his legacy are publicly decimated. Although reports of his behaviour may tarnish Buddhadharma's image, it is the victim and the perpetrator who suffer the most.

The vast majority of lamas are not sexual predators, which is important to bear in mind because a public accusation alone is more than enough to destroy a reputation. But, overall, the harm inflicted by sexual abuse affects fewer people than the devastation wreaked by institutional corruption, misuse of power and financial fraud.

As I write, I can feel my critics bristling with indignation: "But what about the victims!" I deplore sexual abuse in any shape or form and am, of course, deeply concerned about the victims. One of the reasons I wrote this book was to provide new Vajrayana students with the analytical tools they need to ensure that they will never fall victim to any form of abuse.

Institutional Support of Controversial Lamas

The recent scandals have raised a number of legitimate questions. Tibetan Buddhism is, effectively, an organized religion with its own carefully organized institutions and hierarchies. So why haven't modern students been warned about the lamas who are known to misbehave, or whose characters are particularly challenging? Why do the very highest lamas continue to endorse controversial lamas, either in writing, or by being chummy with them in public? These questions clearly highlight some of the challenges faced by Tibetan Buddhism. But finding answers to such questions or even simply a satisfactory response is complicated.

Let's say I come across a new student who has just been accepted by her lama of choice. One look at the new student's radiant smile and I can see that she is over the moon about her guru. However, based on the limits of my own perception, my impression of this lama is that some of his teaching activities are a bit questionable. I may even suspect that the lama is not the man this enthusiastically devoted student thinks he is. But I would have to think long and hard before I shared my assessment with her. Why? To start with, my judgement of the other lama is, of course, based on my own deluded perceptions and preferences. In making my assessment, have I been influenced by personal jealousy? How will this new student interpret what I say to her? Will she take it well? Will she recognize that I am attempting to offer good, heart-felt advice? Will she believe that everything I say comes from a place of care and concern? Or will she assume that I am envious of her lama?

As I am not enlightened, I am keen to preserve my reputation and would prefer not to be thought of as the jealous type. Mahasiddhas, on the other hand, couldn't care less about what other people think of them, especially if what they have to say, however unpopular, might preserve a student's connection with the Dharma. But obviously, I am not a mahasiddha.

Perhaps the new student's lama appears to actively court controversy – Sogyal Rinpoche is not the only lama to have faced wide-spread criticism for his controversial approach to teaching the Vajrayana. The new student's lama may also be especially gifted at attracting new people to the Dharma and his students may feel they derive great benefit from his teachings. But does he really know what he's talking about? Did he receive the proper training? And did he complete that training? By which I mean, did he complete an apprenticeship with an authentic Vajrayana guru?

The behaviour of these more controversial lamas, whose characters are a vast jumble of contradictions, has been and continues to be unskilful to the point of ruination, both for themselves and their students. Worse still, their clumsiness now threatens Buddhadharma itself. What if Buddhism were so completely discredited by the actions of a few clumsy lamas that its teachings were outlawed? What if Buddhadharma became obsolete and future generations were denied the opportunity of hearing a single word the Buddha taught? Such a loss in this precarious world would be catastrophic.

Accusations about Sogyal Rinpoche's behaviour have been circulating for more than twenty-five years and the scandal that finally overtook him was hardly unexpected. The rest of us Tibetan lamas must have heard at least something about what was going on between Sogyal Rinpoche and his students. So why didn't we speak out? I know that some lamas tried talking to him privately, but Sogyal Rinpoche doesn't seem to have heard what they said. Or maybe he just didn't listen.

These days, when a casual selfie of a respectable lama standing next to a controversial lama is posted on social media, it is instantly interpreted as an endorsement – I get quite paranoid about it. Such black and white assumptions put lamas like me in very difficult situations. I am always more than happy to talk things over with other lamas and, where necessary, offer advice. But the subject of abuse is so sensitive that introducing it into a conversation with even

your closest friend is tricky and can easily be misunderstood. So my approach was always to do my best to keep my relationship with Sogyal Rinpoche friendly.

Relationships with Tibetans are always complicated by the Tibetan habit of never telling someone to their face what they really think of them. Westerners find this tradition odd, but it can be very useful. A dispute between lamas is not like two neighbours fighting over the height of a hedge. If lamas are seen to disagree, friendly relations between vast networks of monasteries and lineages can easily be poisoned and rivalries inflamed. We lamas tend to prefer taking the long and careful route, even when the skilful methods we apply are slow and don't appear to work. The whole approach takes ages and involves a great deal of trial and error, but when it does finally work, it's well worth the effort.

I have also noticed that it is more and more difficult for anyone to speak their mind these days. Contemporary commentators vehemently insist that the West continues to value freedom of speech and open-minded debate, but my own experience is quite different. For example, I find I must be extremely careful about how I approach touchy subjects with non-Tibetan Dharma students, especially when we talk about their gurus.

I was brought up in a culture that believes the less disharmony there is between ourselves and others, the better. This preference for harmony has nothing to do with the Dharma, it's a human strategy. But as human beings are complex and contrary, even when we do our best to avoid confrontation and are consistently straightforward and honest, no amount of virtuous behaviour can fully guarantee a good outcome. No matter how generous and kind a man may be, no matter how good his intentions, if he is also immovably stubborn, tempers are bound to flare, both at work and at home. Conflicts are fuelled by human flaws. This is not going to change.

When someone we admire behaves badly, we often censor ourselves by either turning a blind eye to their faults or switching

into denial mode. Each of us finds our own way of living with people who hold very different views. Perhaps your husband, wife, or best friend is a big fan of your boss. But not only does your boss abuse you personally, he also abuses his position of power to feather his own nest. In this case, you would probably remain silent about his treatment of you. Like most of us, you feel constrained by your own selfish agenda – promotion, a pay rise, etc. – that could easily be scuppered if you make a fuss.

In trying to protect our own interests, we rarely express ourselves freely or say what we really mean or believe. It's naïve to imagine that human beings are open-minded enough to be genuinely liberal. The only true liberals are the mahasiddhas, who always say exactly what they mean without an ounce of self-interest getting in the way. The rest of us adjust our behaviour to suit our personal game plan and only speak out when we have something to gain.

We are all selfishly ambitious. It would therefore be disingenuous to imagine that the ability to be objective and apply critical thinking necessarily leads to open honesty, or that we would always act on our beliefs. Most of us refuse to acknowledge that we even have an agenda. Our expertise in self-censorship is so finely honed that we constantly blind ourselves to the source of any number of problems. However blatantly obvious our best friend's bad behaviour – or that of our boss or spouse – we say nothing. Why risk losing a friendship, marriage, or job by speaking our mind? But this is why bad behaviour goes unchecked. When we do act, we often do the wrong thing at the wrong time and end up losing everything, like the son of the Tibetan lumberjack.

An old lumberjack felt so worn out one day that he fell asleep under a tree. As his son looked fondly at his beloved father's face, a fly landed on the old lumberjack's forehead. Knowing how much the old man needed to sleep, the son's reflex was to swat the fly away before it woke his father. His intentions were pure, but he made the

mistake of taking his axe to the fly instead of his hand, missed the fly altogether and chopped his father's head in two.

I was always a bit dubious about Sogyal Rinpoche's methods. Although I never went out of my way to introduce him to friends and students, neither did I ever try to discourage those whom he inspired. After all, who am I to judge? I didn't introduce anyone to the great Chatral Rinpoche either, and he was possibly the most uncompromising lama who ever existed. In Chatral Rinpoche's case, his very incorruptibility sometimes made him a bit hard to take. I avoided introducing him to new Dharma students because he was quite capable of instantly telling them that, as we could die at any moment, making plans was pointless. "And anyway," he would say, "Samsara and this worldly life are meaningless."

I remember a very new American woman telling me that she had liked Chatral Rinpoche when she met him but had not become his student because she felt unable to fulfil his condition. I suspected I knew what that condition was, but I asked anyway. Chatral Rinpoche had told her that she could only become his student if she never planned more than three months ahead. "If you can't do that," he said, "don't ever come back."

A few years ago, I met a Middle Eastern man with a keen interest in Buddhist philosophy. My first thought was that, as it's quite rare to meet such a person, I should introduce him to one of my lama friends. But I hesitated. My friend is an outspoken advocate of vegetarianism and never misses an opportunity to take those he meets to task about their meat-eating habits. Although vegetarianism certainly has many benefits and virtues, I was concerned that my friend's zeal might put the Middle Eastern man off Buddhadharma altogether. But I really wanted the two of them to meet. So, I phoned my friend and asked him to promise, just this once, not to demand that the Middle Eastern man give up eating meat the moment they met. What else could I do?

Buddha: Your Guru

Ironically, although we have been told, time and again, not to rely on the person who gives the teaching, but on the teaching itself, most of us never do. Why? Some of us meet a guru and are instantly hooked. That's it! Our search for a guru is over and we don't feel the need for anyone or anything else. Others start by trying to read the Buddhist teachings on their own. After a few hours, we realise that all the thick, heavy Dharma books we have on our desks are full of incomprehensible Buddhist jargon and therefore too difficult to understand. And anyway, which should we read first? So we try attending Dharma talks. But that doesn't work because listening to random teachings is just as confusing, especially when we find ourselves sitting in hot, stuffy, overcrowded rooms where convoluted, difficult-to-grasp concepts are debated at great length.

A human teacher is quite different. We can see, touch and talk to a teacher. For many of us, the mere existence of our teacher not only inspires but encourages us. Some teachers don't have to say a word. Mata Amritanandamayi, the 'hugging saint', inspires millions of people all over the world merely by hugging them. It's a fascinating method. And who am I to judge whether it works or not?

Finding the right human teacher can be a problem. From Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev to Eckhart Tolle, gurus who claim to have experienced revelations on sun-drenched beaches or in smoky kitchens continue to pop up like mushrooms. They all have their own brand of charisma and much of what they say sounds true and good, but is rarely new or original. More often than not, their teachings are just a repackaged version of something that has been said many times before. Whether you follow such a guru or not is up to you. You are free to examine these teachers and their teachings, then decide for yourself who makes sense and who doesn't. You are also free not to examine them at all if you don't want to. But, at some

point during the process of choosing a teacher, your own emotional responses, however fleeting, will influence you.

A teacher can be chosen using the same tools we use to choose a university. Let's say you are very ambitious and decide to apply to Oxford University in England because that's where fifty-five Nobel Prize winners were educated. If a new university that looked exactly like Oxford sprang up overnight on the banks of the Isis, would you apply to it? No, you wouldn't. As your ambition is to win a Nobel Prize, it makes more sense to put yourself in the hands of a university with a proven track-record of successfully guiding previous winners. This is why Dharma students are advised to find out whether or not the guru they are attracted to has a guru of his or her own, and to ask, did that guru's guru follow a guru? In other words, is the guru part of a guru lineage? And how many of the gurus in that lineage were the equivalent of Nobel Prize winners?

One of the benefits of following a guru who belongs to a respected guru lineage is that they are likely to have received a thorough education. Would you ask a Cartier-trained goldsmith to reset your grandmother's diamonds, or the hobby metalworker who lives next door? If you needed a lawyer, wouldn't you make sure she was well-qualified? Don't we all prefer to choose our doctors, housepainters and plumbers based on a personal recommendation from someone we trust? Or are you comfortable entrusting your legal work to someone with no qualifications and no office, whose name you found in the classified ads of your free local newspaper because he has a pleasant manner on the phone?

Of course, individual human rights being what they are, there is nothing to stop you from choosing the hobby metalworker or that man with the nice voice. You are free to do whatever you wish – and please, be my guest. But remember, if anything goes wrong, you are on your own. This is why lineage is so emphasized in the Vajrayana.

Much is made these days about intellectual property and copyright. Emerging economies like China are regularly censured in

the European and American media for stealing western ideas. Yet the West has been stealing ideas from Asia for centuries and continues to do so on both a corporate and individual level. Many of today's more popular mindfulness techniques were originally taught in India. The Japanese art of flower arrangement (which the Japanese imported from China, along with Buddhism) and the Japanese tea ceremony have both been plagiarised, rearranged and repackaged for the western world, without a word crediting the originators. Similarly, few of today's so-called spiritual teachers and writers acknowledge their sources; 'credit where credit is due' has gone out of fashion. These teachers steal insights from the world's greatest spiritual thinkers, dumb down the language, then pass it off as their own.

If, in spite of the mystery surrounding their spiritual education, you decide to follow one of these new teachers, be aware that you are taking a big risk. Rejecting organized religion and putting yourself in the hands of a guru who pops up overnight like a mushroom is as foolhardy as trusting your grandmother's diamonds to a hobby metalworker. Always bear in mind that if an instant infatuation prompts you to throw in your lot with a mushroom guru, then, spiritually, you are on your own.

Today, all forms of religion are eyed with suspicion, particularly the established, organized religions. But aren't unaffiliated, self-proclaimed gurus even more suspect? What guarantees do you have that a self-proclaimed guru will not abuse you or steal from you? This life provides us with very few guarantees, but the tried and tested checks and balances provided by organized religions do help. If the mushroom guru you are inspired by is not connected with a group or tradition, he or she will not be subject to any form of oversight whatsoever. It's up to you whether or not you take that risk, but if you do, you will have no spiritual recourse of any kind.

How, you may ask, did the fact that Sogyal Rinpoche was part of an authentic lineage help his students? When a guru belongs to a tradition and a lineage, it is possible to consult an authoritative

source of the teachings for advice. Students of self-appointed, mushroom gurus do not have that kind of support. The only reason we can now scrutinize what went wrong between Sogyal Rinpoche and some of his students is that he was part of an authentic lineage that consistently applies all the Vajrayana's recommended checks and balances. The fact that a guru belongs to a lineage may not guarantee good behaviour, but at least students have a valid body of teaching to refer to.

Having said that, the manifestations of the bodhisattvas are infinite, so who am I to judge whether someone is a qualified teacher or not? If you aspire to follow the Buddhadharma and are dubious about choosing a guru by following your heart, I strongly recommend that you take the traditional route of hearing, contemplation and analysis.

Dharma: the Teachings

Some people are attracted to the Buddha's teachings but prefer to give all gurus a wide berth. "I want to be a Buddhist, but I don't want a guru and will read lots of Buddhist books instead." The big drawback to this approach is that you are stuck with just one interpretation of everything you read – your own. You will only ever be able to see the teachings from the inside of your own conceptual box. Without a guru or a sangha, none of your preconceived ideas, hang-ups, misconceptions and so on will be challenged, and misunderstandings will not be corrected.

Sangha: Buddhadharma's Checks and Balances

The system of 'sangha' already has all the necessary checks and balances built in. This is one of the many reasons why sangha is so

important. Institutions like Nalanda, Odantapuri and Vikramashila were originally founded to support the sangha. Similarly, shedras, monasteries and retreat centres were set up in Tibet to support the sangha. And although institutionalization breeds its own problems, isn't it common sense to have your appendix taken out by a well-qualified surgeon at a reputable hospital, not by your local barber? Isn't a qualified surgeon safer than a brilliant self-publicist who can barely read, let alone get into a medical school?

Never forget, your guru is your choice. It is your right as an individual to make all your own decisions. But who will you turn to for help and guidance if your inspiring mushroom guru is unaffiliated? Is it possible to follow the Buddha's teaching without risking abuse? Of course it is. And perhaps the most effective safeguard of all is to check your potential guru's background *before* you ask him or her to be your Vajrayana guru.

Always bear in mind that all organized religions and spiritual groups are run by deluded human beings, and as such, there is always plenty of fertile ground for corruption, bureaucratic skulduggery and political power play. So, if your choice of guru was made on a whim or not carefully thought through, and that guru then steals from you or abuses you mentally or sexually, there will be no one to listen to your complaints – no spiritual organization, no lineage and no educational system.

EIGHT

The View: All or Nothing

Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness, there is no form, no feeling,
no perception, no formation, no consciousness;
no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind;
no appearance, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no dharmas;
no eye dhatu up to no mind dhatu;
no dhatu of dharmas, no mind consciousness dhatu;
no ignorance, no end of ignorance up to no old age and death,
no end of old age and death;
no suffering, no origin of suffering, no cessation of suffering,
no path, no wisdom,
no attainment, and no non-attainment.
Therefore, Shariputra, since the bodhisattvas have no attainment,
they abide by means of prajñāparamita.
Since there is no obscuration of mind, there is no fear.

THIS FAMOUS EXCERPT from the Nalanda Translation Committee's well-known translation of the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*, popularly known as the *Heart Sutra*, is an expression of the inexpressible, fundamental Buddhist view (if it can be called a 'view') born from Lord Buddha's great compassion.

What is a 'view'? Before he sets sail around the world, a sea captain must have complete confidence in the fact that the earth is round. Without that 'view', he would not even think about sailing from New York to Auckland, let alone chart a course. If he genuinely believed that the world is flat and was convinced that it is possible to fall off its edge into oblivion, he would never set sail. As it is, the roundness of the earth is a proven physical fact. Based on that

fact, the sea captain's view is that he will be able to sail from New York to Auckland without falling into space. There is no need for him to continuously reinforce this view by reciting "the earth is round" day and night because he is certain. Although the map the captain uses to plan his route is not round – it is a two-dimensional drawing on a flat sheet of paper – the flatness of the map does not deceive the captain into thinking the world itself is also flat, or that his ship might fall off its edge. All of which demonstrates just how indispensable the right view is.

One of the views taught in the Buddha's Dharma is 'all compounded things are impermanent'. The truth of this statement may convince us intellectually, but when life knocks us down, in an effort to steady ourselves we grab at the first thing we can lay our hands on. Lacking the ship captain's unshakable conviction, we plan as if we will live forever.

'All that appears has no truly existing self' is another Buddhist view, but it's not quite as easy to grasp as 'all compounded things are impermanent'. Our conviction in this view is more like that of the sea captain who wants to believe that the world is round but still feels paranoid about falling off the edge.

From the time of Shakyamuni Buddha until today, authentic teachers have continually emphasized the importance of establishing and holding the right view. They consistently warn of the dangers of holding a wrong view, an incomplete view, or not holding any kind of a view at all. Yet, as important as the view is, most of us prefer its opposite. We want to believe that some things truly exist and are permanent, and that our emotions are blissful.

If you pay attention to what you read in Buddhist texts, you will know that the most vicious of all unvirtuous attitudes is wrong view. Everything misfires when you hold a wrong view – everything you think, everything you do, how you relate to yourself, how you relate to others, and so on. Life may jog along as usual for a while, but eventually, everything falls apart. Just like the sea captain whose

wrong view that the earth is flat makes him paranoid about falling over the edge, putting him at loggerheads with his crew who know the earth is round, you will never be able to relax and none of your relationships will run smoothly.

The chances of people like us getting interested in the right view are slim, even when we know that wrong views always take us in the wrong direction. It's a bit like the world's attitude to plastic: we know that plastic is bad for everyone and the environment, but as it keeps produce fresh, weighs very little and doesn't cost much, we are unable to stop making or using it. Plastic is the easy, short-term solution. All over India, chai used to be drunk from clay cups, but these days everyone uses plastic cups because it's more convenient for both the chai wallah and the chai drinker.

Buddhists are extremely wary of all wrong views and usually diagnose a preference for convenience as a lack of *punya* (merit) or, in some cases, no merit at all. What is a Buddhist 'wrong view'? The belief that phenomena appear by accident is a wrong view. The belief that a phenomenon was created by an almighty god is also a wrong view. The belief that tables and mountains are permanent is a wrong view because both are impermanent. A table is made up of various parts, so the belief that it is a single element is a wrong view. Tables and mountains are transitory, complex, constantly changing objects, so to imagine that there is something called 'table-ness' or 'mountain-ness' is a wrong view. The belief that there is a 'self' is also a wrong view, because there is none. And if a tantrika makes any kind of distinction or develops preferences of any sort, that too is a wrong view.

According to the tantric texts, everything we deluded beings see, project, imagine, measure and decide is limited, partial and one-sided, and bound by time, space, numbers, language, culture and habit. This is what tantra describes as 'impure' perception. It's like being drunk. Everything you perceive is distorted by your drunkenness and therefore impure. Once you sober up, you return

to your original, pre-alcoholic state. But drunk or sober, you are always ‘you’. Under the influence of alcohol your projections are skewed, but you continue to be you. Before you drink, while you are drunk and after you sober up, you are still the same you. Not only are you the same, but all phenomena continue to be the same. Nothing changes. This is the tantric view. And the meaning of the word ‘tantra’ is ‘continuity’ or ‘thread’.

Followers of a number of different faiths, from those who participate in interfaith conferences to the religious pundits on the BBC, regularly give the impression that all religions are the same. They love to talk about the similar methods and techniques each religion uses – do not steal, do not kill, practise non-violence and tolerance and so on – but they never discuss any similarities of view. In a way, it’s understandable. Few teachers these days know much about the view, and those who do, don’t know how to teach it to their own community, let alone to people from entirely different backgrounds and cultures.

Let’s be honest, as a subject, the view is as dry as a bone and frankly rather dull. It’s neither user-friendly nor colourful, and it doesn’t create the immediately evocative and inspiring atmosphere we experience in a room full of smouldering incense, fragrant flower arrangements and exotic sacred music. Teachings about the Buddhist view make people yawn and students often beat themselves up for not being smart enough to understand what it’s all about.

Once a ship’s course has been set its captain can relax. Knowing that the earth is round, he is confident his ship will not sail over the edge. Similarly, if the teachings on the Buddhist view are fully understood, many of the challenges we face on the Dharma path are instantly resolved. From questions like, “Should I offer marigolds or roses?” and “Is the Indian or the Thai style of prostration the most authentic?” to “How should we interpret stories about that guy whose guru made him build a nine-storey building?” and “What about those students whose guru beat them with a back-scratcher?”

Some people take one look at Buddhist methods and dismiss them as archaic superstition or Shamanistic mumbo jumbo. For others, Buddhadharma is magical. If I develop an itchy rash on my arm, I am comforted when my guru advises me to chant a specific mantra. Students are thrilled when their teacher tells them to practise being mindful of their breathing, or to receive an initiation, or to do a daily sadhana practice. Others love to offer incense and to practise sitting meditation. Some are even excited and inspired by the challenge of perceiving a decrepit old man who drools and talks gibberish as a perfect being. All sorts of people are inspired by Buddhism's methods and eager to practise them.

If your practice is accompanied by a strong belief in the right view, the guru is a magical, all-powerful guide, capable of showing you how to dismantle dualistic distinctions and leading you to the realisation of non-duality. But without the right view, you can forget about seeing a drooling guru as a perfect buddha. No matter how straight your back is as you meditate, without the right view, you won't achieve much. Your realisation will never take flight or soar swiftly and blissfully to the end of the path. Without the right view, how long do you think you can keep up the discipline of sitting practice? Sitting meditation is like weightlifting, if you don't do it for a couple of weeks, your muscles get saggy. Without the view, sitting practice is a bit like weeding: if you miss a week, the weeds grow back, and you have to start again from scratch. The same goes for mindfulness; one week without practice and even the most enthusiastic mindfulness freak will be back at square one. So, what's the point? Why bother? Mindfulness alone won't get you anywhere. All it does is recharge your batteries – and those batteries will always need recharging. Think about it for a moment. Isn't the prospect of doing mindfulness practice every day until you die rather grim, even depressing? Mindfulness practice without the view is just another of samsara's boring games. It is like watching paint dry, practically and literally.

If the purpose of Buddhism were to do no more than meditate continuously year in, year out, it wouldn't be much different from self-flagellation. For a Buddhist practitioner, the sign of real progress is the complete exhaustion of the path itself, which cannot be accomplished without an understanding of the view.

The Buddhist Path

It might be easier for you to get the hang of the Buddhist path if you think of it as a mixture of four ingredients: view, practice, behaviour and result.

Buddhist View

For the time being, let's summarize the Buddhist view as: all compounded things are impermanent; all emotions are pain; nothing inherently exists; and so-called nirvana, enlightenment, is beyond extremes and fabrication. This teaching is known as the Four Seals.

Buddhist Practice

No matter which method you choose to practise – offering incense, meditation practice, or chanting mantras – it must go against, oppose and counter duality. In other words, the method must contradict the opposite of the view, and enhance your certainty and realisation of that view. If it does, it is a Buddhist practice. If it doesn't, but you wish and pray, may everything I do enhance my realisation of the view, it is still considered a Buddhist practice. Basically, all practices that contradict duality are in alignment with the Buddhist view.

Buddhist Behaviour

Buddhist behaviour does not fall into extremes. No matter what your profession or dietary preferences – renunciant, householder, cave-dweller, bank manager, vegetarian or paleo – you must never

go to extremes. Why not? Because an extreme is comparative and therefore dualistic, and duality does not align with the Buddhist view. This does not mean that a Buddhist who is also a vegetarian must force themselves to eat a morsel of meat occasionally to guard against becoming an extremist. Being vegetarian is not the goal, it's a method. Liberation is the goal.

Buddhist Result

The result of Buddhist practice is defined by elimination. For example, the dream you have as you sleep is instantly eliminated when you wake up, and the result we describe as 'waking up' is precisely aligned with the Buddhist view. In other words, once you have woken up to the idea that all compounded things are impermanent, not just intellectually but emotionally, you will no longer cling to your 1960 Chevrolet Bel Air or to your happily-ever-after relationship. The Buddhist result is therefore defined by elimination, not by something gained or obtained.

The Indispensable View

Do you like listening to Theravada teachings on impermanence (*aniccā*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and selflessness (*anattā*)? Or to the Bodhisattvayana teachings on Prajnaparamita (the perfection of wisdom), shunyata and mahakaruna? Perhaps you prefer the more mind-boggling Tantrayana teachings, like one hundred emotions equal one hundred wisdoms, and just as a heap of rocks containing high-grade gold ore is actually a pile of gold, a thundercloud of intense rage is actually a cloud of wisdom. Or the tantric teaching that your body, this decaying lump of meat, is none other than the deity, the mandala. Whichever vehicle of Buddhist teachings you choose to listen to, they are all about the view. And, as the masters of the past have already said and the teachers of the future will continue

to repeat, the view is difficult to understand. But it's not because the view is dense or tedious. The view is difficult because we human beings lack merit.

What does 'the view is difficult' mean? The view is difficult because the 'viewer' refuses to look at it. In other words, the viewer is in denial and denial of the view is a classic symptom of lack of merit. From gross denials like "smoking is not bad for my health" to the more subtle denials like "the abuse I endure is not bad for our relationship", being in denial of the view is one of our most deeply ingrained habits. It is also among the smartest and most stubborn of all the defilements we cling to. Viewers tend to resist looking at the view because they are comfortable with the status quo. If every day for ten years you take the same route to work, the habit becomes so strong that when a new, quicker, safer route opens up, you are almost afraid to try it out. A more potent reason for avoiding looking at the view is that it presents a paradox. And we human beings simply don't have the know-how to live with paradox.

We venerate and pay homage to the Buddha for all the wisdom and skilful means he gave us. But to me, his single most important teaching is about how to appreciate a paradox and live with it.

Paradox

"How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress."

Niels Bohr, Nobel Laureate in Physics, 1922⁸

What is a paradox? The English word 'paradox' (a combination of contradictory features) implies the involvement of two or more elements. In the context of the Buddhadharma, the word 'paradox'

could, from one point of view, be summed up as ‘an appreciation of the non-duality of emptiness and appearance’. But, like many translations, this does not do justice to its Buddhist meaning.

‘Non-duality’ is a common English translation of the Sanskrit word *advaya*, which means ‘not two’ or ‘without a second, sole, unique’, but Buddhists often prefer to use the word ‘union’⁹. The problem with ‘union’ is that it implies the combination of two or more elements – like the European Union, or the marriage union – and therefore strays quite a long way from the original Buddhist concept of *advaya*. Even so, Buddhists continue to talk about ‘union’.

Another important word in our discussion is the Tibetan word *miche*, from the tantric term *michepa*¹⁰. *Miche* is often represented by a vajra, and means ‘impossible to divorce’, ‘indivisible’, ‘changeless’ or ‘indestructible’. Like fire and heat, *michepa* can neither be separated, nor is it one. If fire and heat were separable, the moment you looked at a fire, you would get burnt.

To understand the Buddhist path, we need to get to grips with what Buddhists mean by ‘paradox’ – its nature, function and how it works. Paradoxes can be found in every nook and cranny of the Buddhist path. A Theravadin, for example, always insists on maintaining a straight back as he sits in meditation and endeavours to keep his Vinaya vows intact. At the same time, he never, even for a moment, abandons the view that, in reality, there is no ‘self’ to sit straight-backed or maintain vows – the view of *anattā*. In the Mahayana, the Prajnaparamita Sutra states that ‘form is emptiness’ and in the same breath, ‘emptiness is form’. But when it comes to using paradox as a path, I think it’s fair to say that tantra and the Vajrayana put all the other paths in the shade.

At first glance, the Buddha’s teachings, many of which are paradoxical by nature, appear to contradict each other. In the Jatakamala Sutra, popularly known as the Jataka Tales, Buddha tells us that, “Once upon a time when I was a monkey” and “Once upon a time when I was a king”, and implies not only that a self

exists but so does reincarnation. Yet, alongside teachings that imply reincarnation, the Buddha also taught *anattā* (the perception of a constant 'self' is an illusion).

The overused English word 'reincarnation' is a problem because it leads contemporary readers to the mistaken belief that a self, or soul, or personality truly exists and reincarnates. I hate that word!

In the sutra teachings, the Buddha describes how actions reap consequences. To kill sentient beings is the opposite of a virtuous activity; the consequences include unimaginable suffering in the hell realms and a shortened life in the human realm. He also speaks about the power of aspiration over action. We may be unable to dispel the suffering of others with our actions, he said, but the aspiration, 'may all be free from suffering' will always work wonders. Yet, alongside his teachings on aspiration and action, the Buddha also describes the power of doing nothing at all: "do not dwell in the past, do not dwell in the future and do not contrive".

Buddha tells us that no emotion is more perilous than anger and that hatred destroys all virtue and wholesomeness. He also says that just as it is only possible to track down a lost elephant by following its footprints, the only way to track down your inherent wisdom is by following wisdom's footprints, which are your own anger, desire and so on.

All emotions belong to the five buddha families. Tantra talks about the relationship between the buddha families in the same way zoologists point out that although dolphins look like fish, they are, in fact, mammals. Similarly, as far as tantra is concerned, whatever an emotion may look like, it is, in fact, a member of a buddha family. All Tantric practitioners should cultivate this attitude to their emotions. Just as lotuses are only found growing in muddy water, wisdom can only be found in our negative emotions.

The bottom line here is that all Buddha's teachings are paradoxical. Are Buddhists embarrassed by the apparent contradictions such paradoxes underline? Should all contradictions now be revised

and smoothed out? Absolutely not! Far from being embarrassed, Buddhists celebrate all such paradoxes because they contain the immeasurable wealth and richness of Buddhadharma.

But the question remains, why did Buddha fill his teachings with so many paradoxes? Why did he teach in such a contradictory manner?

A top MIT physicist who lives on the 21st floor of a brand-new apartment building comes home one day to see his two-year-old son hanging precariously over the edge of the balcony. What should the physicist do? Would an anxious father who is ordinarily the nerdiest, most uncompromising, monomaniacal of characters, start explaining the laws of gravity to his imperilled son in an effort to convince him to move to safety? Or would he attract his son's attention and coax him to safety by dangling his favourite stuffed panda? The physicist knows the bear isn't real, but as his priority is to save his son, he relates to the bear as if it were real. Likewise, the Buddha, our compassionate guide and teacher, has never stopped dangling, rattling, flaunting, trumpeting, prancing and dancing in order to encourage us to turn our attention away from high-risk distractions to safer options. Just as the physicist would never consider his son's stuffed panda to be less useful or important than his institute's precious Interferometer, Buddhists would never disparage paradoxical teachings or regard them with contempt. After all, without the panda, how would the physicist have coaxed his son to safety.

The Two Truths

One of the Buddha's methods for getting accustomed to living with the paradoxical that is also a popular method for establishing the Buddhist view is the teaching known as the 'two truths': the 'relative' or 'conventional' truth and the 'ultimate' or 'absolute' truth. What is the relative truth? At the simplest level, it is everything the deceptive,

dualistic, cheating mind perceives. What is the ultimate truth? The exact opposite of the relative truth – there is nothing deceptive about the ultimate truth. However, talking about the ultimate truth is a dualistic activity, which means that discussion is always categorized as a relative truth. The ultimate truth is beyond discussion, labelling, distinctions, dualities, judgements and categories.

The challenge faced by many students and practitioners is that initially, the relative truth and the absolute truth sound like two separate kinds of truth that may even be arch-rivals. But of course, they are not. The two truths – the relative truth and the absolute truth – are simply a linguistic tool that we have no choice but to use in order to discuss two aspects of the truth. The relative truth is like glancing at a stripy rope and mistaking it for a snake, and the absolute truth is that the snake does not exist. Our problem is not how to get rid of the snake, because there is and never was a snake. The problem is, having experienced the illusion of a snake, how do we now rid ourselves of the fear of being confronted with a snake?

From what I have seen, this crucially important teaching has either been miscommunicated to westerners or not explained thoroughly enough. To most western minds, ‘ultimate’ sounds more important than ‘relative’. This may be why so many western people appear to value the ultimate truth more highly than the relative truth. Buddhists don’t make that distinction; it’s not how Buddhists think. The Dharma neither looks down on the relative truth nor up to the ultimate truth, not because, like the panda and the Interferometer, they are equally important, but because neither exists. Both are mere tools. Just as the Interferometer is not one penny more valuable to the physicist than the panda, the relative truth is not one penny less valuable to a Buddhist than the ultimate truth. The survival of the Buddhadharma not only depends on a thorough understanding of the relative truth and the ultimate truth – perhaps ‘absolute’ truth is a better translation – but also on the recognition that the point

of distinguishing relative from absolute is an educational tool, not a reality.

There is no western equivalent for Buddhist terms like relative truth and absolute truth, clarity and emptiness, or even samsara and nirvana, all of which have been adopted for the sake of communication and are therefore relative truths. And remember, the relative truth does not actually exist. Similarly, ‘ground, path and fruit or result’ is a Buddhist categorization used in some of the most direct of all Buddhist teachings, yet that too is a relative truth – or as Donald Trump would say, fake news.

Although the concepts of ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ are regularly discussed separately in the West, I often wonder if they have ever been combined as a method. I have never seen it done myself. Towards the end of the Buddhist path, it becomes abundantly clear that the division of relative and absolute only ever functions on a relative level. In other words, the absolute truth can only ever be defined as a relative truth. Again, this is something western thought does not appear to have recognized.

Relative (expedient teachings) and absolute (direct or definitive teachings) are Indian concepts. Have Christianity, Judaism or Islam ever used methods that appear to contradict their absolute goal in the way Buddhist expedient teachings and direct teachings do? To a western mind, relative truth can sound like an allegory or parable that was made up to illustrate a point, whereas the absolute truth usually sounds like ‘the real thing’. But as the Buddha himself explained, both the relative and the ultimate are simply made-up stories.

The concept of relative and absolute truths – expedient and direct – is not only used in religious teachings. Imagine you are a cholera expert who has been sent to a remote part of India. It’s your job to help teach a group of volunteers the quickest and most effective methods for containing a serious cholera outbreak. You are keen to do well and be a credit to your organization, but your

primary motivation is the compassion you feel for victims of this terrible disease. You start by explaining to the volunteers that cholera is spread by contaminated food and water, and that the best way to contain an outbreak is to identify the source of the contamination. This simple, tried and tested method always works but often takes a little time.

The volunteers, whose job it is to tend to the sick and dying, listen to your lecture, look at your photographs of bacteria and come to the conclusion that testing the local water would take them away from their patients for too long. Just the thought of leaving their patients alone for an hour horrifies them, and if you were to ask them to spend a whole day checking local wells, you would risk alienating them altogether. So instead, you teach them the less effective but more familiar methods of boiling the water and improving hygiene on every level – methods that your volunteers are willing to apply. Gradually, things improve and, having gained their trust, you can now start gently luring them towards the unfamiliar, but more effective, ultimate method of testing all the well water.

A method is only useful if the practitioner is willing to try it. This is why Buddhadharmā offers so many different methods and it's also why some methods appear to contradict others. (Not to mention the contradictions we find between each vehicle, and sometimes even within a single sūtra.)

Buddhism is currently being taught to people who are unaccustomed to being lured towards the absolute truth with what the English might call a series of 'white lies'. Buddhist teachers should be aware of this. Students like practising the Buddhist methods that initially accommodate their habitual patterns but eventually, such methods must be set aside. Imagine you have a problem and ask your skilful teacher how to solve it. The teacher pinpoints the nature of your problem and confirms that you need to discard its cause. But as your teacher can see that the most effective method for dealing with that problem is beyond you right now, she teaches you a soothing,

non-confrontational method that she knows you are capable of practising. The soothing method is the exact opposite of the more effective method, but you are willing to give it try until you are ready to attempt the method that actually works.

As the method the guru recommends depends entirely on the student's capacities and needs, you might first be given a relaxing mindfulness practice. Your best friend, who met your teacher at exactly the same time, may be given a pointing-out instruction. A good teacher creates the perfect path for each student. This flexibility, which is an intrinsic aspect of the Buddha's teachings, is what makes Buddhism so effective.

Buddhadharma's built-in flexibility is one of its greatest strengths. It would be such a shame if Buddhadharma were concretized to such a degree that it became just another franchise. All its individually crafted, tailor-made paths would have to be dropped in favour of predetermined formulas, lists of rules and an unbending curriculum of strictly regimented skilful methods. With the contents of the path set in stone, Buddhism would become a kind of spiritual Starbucks. No matter where in the world you buy your Starbucks coffee, you know exactly what you will get – the taste never deviates. If you order a Starbucks Caramel Cocoa Cluster Frappuccino® Blended Coffee in Gangtok, it will taste exactly the same as it does in Guadalajara.

Starbucks coffee is the safest of safe bets – which is exactly how I would define the franchise mentality. But how does making safe bets help us on a spiritual path? And how safe can any of us really be? Buddhism must stay true to its uniquely versatile approach, and that means Buddhist teachers must have the freedom to tailor a student's path to suit the student's needs.

Vajrayana Methodology

THE GREAT INDIAN wisdom traditions, including Buddhism and especially Vajrayana Buddhism, teach and make use of the superabundance of methods known as ‘skilful means’ or ‘skilful methods’. Lamas use these skilful methods when they teach and practise. In fact, lamas use skilful methods in all their human interactions, and especially when they are trying to interest new people in the Dharma and, ultimately, lead them to liberation. Few Buddhist teachers and practitioners are familiar with the entire range of skilful methods available, but just knowing that so many exist is encouraging. No one needs to use every single method. Only food critics sample all the dishes at a buffet, the rest of us just eat what we like the look of and leave the rest. But it’s always nice to have options.

All Buddha’s skilful methods are taught within the context of ‘expedient¹¹’ and ‘direct¹²’ teachings. The simple technique of watching the breath is now so widely accepted that mainstream mental health experts recommend it as a method for managing stress levels. For Buddhists, watching the breath is a means not an end. We don’t practise Buddhism to learn how to breathe. The goal of Buddhadharma is liberation. We enrich our minds with skilful methods and learn how to use them so that, on the path to liberation, we can deal with whatever life or death throws at us. Knowing we have a vast store of methods to call on helps us relax. And as we deepen our practice, the effect of each method grows richer and more powerful.

For example, the Mahayana offers a skilful method called ‘Tonglen’: as you breathe out, you give all your health and wellbeing to others, and as you breathe in, you receive or take on all their

illness and suffering. Other skilful Mahayana methods include the paramitas of generosity, discipline and so on, and their purpose is to wake us up. Tantric skilful methods include the techniques of visualization, mantra recitation and guru devotion. The point of all these methods is not to practise them until our performance is perfect, but to attain liberation.

We follow the Buddhist path to discover and realise the truth. Once we have realised that truth, the path that led us there becomes redundant – it's finished. If there were no end to the path, Buddhists, like all samsaric beings, would continue to go round and round in circles forever. What is it that ensures there is an end to the Buddhist path? Wisdom and method.

However, as the great masters of the past said again and again, we must never allow wisdom to hijack a method, or a method to hijack wisdom. We must never let our obsession with sitting meditation hijack our appreciation of emptiness, shunyata – “There is nothing more important than sitting practice! Why bother with philosophical discussions?” Neither must we let the view of shunyata hijack our meditation – “Why bother meditating when all phenomena are empty?” Focusing exclusively on either the wisdom or the method will get us nowhere because wisdom and method are inseparable.

The Mahayana is broadly defined by its vast motivation and the Vajrayana by its countless skilful methods. But that doesn't mean the Mahayana lacks skilful methods – not at all. A marvellous example of a Mahayana method that makes full use of the inseparability of wisdom and skilful means is that of asking all the buddhas of the ten directions and three times to turn the wheel of dharma. All you have to do is make a wish and instantly all the buddhas are there for you. Some of you might ask, how do we invite all the buddhas of the future? The inseparability of wisdom and method takes care of that, and ensures that you don't need to worry about how to fit all those buddhas into your room. When you offer a single stick of incense to the buddhas of the ten directions and three times, the non-duality of

wisdom and method means you don't have to worry about whether one stick will be enough, because 'enough', 'the number of incense sticks', and 'an infinite number of buddhas' are all aspects of duality.

The Vajrayana's wisdom methods are even more impressive. The Mahayana practices invite the buddhas to come to you so that you can make them offerings, whereas the Vajrayana says, with total confidence, that visualizing yourself as the deity and wafting incense under your own nose is exactly the same as making offerings to all the buddhas of the ten directions and three times. 'Self' is just a label, so as a method for accumulating even more merit that is also an exercise in humility, why not label yourself 'buddha'?

From the point of view of the Vajrayana, there is nothing that cannot be used as a method; and where there is wisdom, there is nothing that cannot be used as a path.

Expedient and Direct

In the West, most teachers and students are hard pushed to tell the difference between an expedient and a direct teaching. And most don't have a clue about how or when to apply which teaching. This is a problem, especially when that lack of understanding leads students to develop a bias for the direct teachings.

The words 'expedient' and 'direct' exist in the English language, but I have never seen a western philosophical method that combines the two. Shadows of the Buddhist meanings of these terms are alluded to in western philosophy, but as far as I can tell, it has never recognized that once the end of the path has been reached, both the tools and their labels must be classified as 'expedient'.

It is said that Buddha never taught to exhibit his knowledge and that every word he spoke, was spoken out of compassion. Buddha taught to wake sentient beings up to the fact that we are trapped in a vicious cycle of ignorance, confusion, reaction and its consequences,

all of which only ever leads to even more ignorance, confusion and so on. Some of Buddha's teachings aim to temporarily lift suffering beings out of their immediate confusion, and this is why the Buddhist path is packed with expedient teachings. When we are ready to progress beyond the expedient teachings, a great wealth of the Buddha's many direct teachings is immediately available to us. At the same time, one person's direct teaching is another person's expedient teaching. Unfortunately this fluidity has created a great deal of confusion in the Buddhist world.

Buddha said:

Commit not a single unwholesome action,
Cultivate a wealth of virtue,
To completely tame this mind of ours—
This is the teaching of the buddhas.¹³

"To completely tame this mind of ours" is probably the most direct of the three teachings mentioned in this verse. Even so, the Buddha's priority is to rescue those who follow his advice from unvirtuous actions *before* we get too tangled up in them. For those of us who are able to digest instructions like 'do not kill' and 'do not lie', "commit not a single unwholesome action" is a direct teaching. For those who can digest a little more than 'do no wrong', the Buddha adds "cultivate a wealth of virtue", by being patient, kind, compassionate and so on.

Many of Buddha's followers prefer simple, unambiguous instructions that tell them exactly what to do and what not to do. If such a person were about to commit a murder, Buddha's instruction 'do not kill' would be easier to digest than 'tame your mind'. This way of conceptualizing the teachings is unfamiliar in the West and may be why so many of Buddha's teachings are misunderstood. It may also be why western practitioners develop such a strong bias for

either the expedient or the direct teachings – a bias that needs to be addressed.

Expedient and direct teachings are taught in layers. When a layer of the teaching ‘all compounded things are impermanent’ is taught as a ‘direct’ teaching, the guru states with absolute confidence that nothing can change or alter it. All compounded things were impermanent before the Buddha appeared on this earth, they continued to be impermanent while he was here, and they have remained impermanent ever since he passed into parinirvana. This first layer is a ‘direct’ teaching and as such, will probably always be true. But that’s not all there is to it.

At the appropriate time, a savvy teacher will introduce students to the next layer of this teaching, which is that the relative truth is an illusion and neither permanent nor impermanent. When we examine ‘all compounded things are impermanent’, we see that the word ‘all’ is just a label and therefore a relative truth; the same goes for ‘compounded’ and ‘impermanent’. In other words, ‘all’, ‘compounded’ and ‘impermanent’ are illusions that are neither permanent nor impermanent. Therefore, within the context of this layer of teachings, the truth that ‘all compounded things are impermanent’ is an expedient teaching.

There has been a lot of talk over the past few years about the Buddhist teachings on karma and reincarnation. New western students usually assume that both are core Buddhist teachings. What does ‘core’ mean? A core teaching is an essential teaching. And what does ‘essential’ mean? If you think ‘essential’ means ‘ultimate’, you are completely wrong. ‘Essential’, in this context, means an ‘indispensable’ teaching; “part of something that is central to its existence or character”.

As I have already mentioned, Stephen Batchelor thinks it is possible not to believe in reincarnation and still be a Buddhist. I think the root of his misunderstanding lies in his cultural

conditioning and imprecise use of language – specifically, many of the English translations of Tibetan terms that we have been using for decades. Those who grew up in Christian countries where it is taken for granted that all human beings have souls, understand the word ‘reincarnation’ quite differently to the way Buddhists understand it. What Christians call ‘soul’, Buddhists describe as a ‘truly existing self’. Nowhere does Buddhism say that a butterfly’s truly existing self can be reborn in a horse’s body. As the Buddha pointed out, that would be like taking a song out of a singing teacher’s mouth and putting it into the mouth of her student. A far more accurate image, and one that Buddha himself used to illustrate how reincarnation works, is that of lighting one candle from the flame of another.

I wonder if Stephen Batchelor has difficulties with karma and reincarnation because he never got to the bottom of the Indian wisdom teachings, particularly the Buddhist teachings on relative and absolute truth, and the expedient and direct teachings? His writings give the impression that he is ashamed of karma and reincarnation, as if they were Buddhism’s greatest weakness and, like a third testicle, should be hidden away.

Aren’t serious students of Buddhadharma bound to notice that in some teachings Buddha talks about reincarnation whereas in others he focuses on selflessness, and be curious about how that works?

As a boy, I was taught about expedient teachings but struggled to appreciate them. When I heard Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche wheezing his way through an asthma attack, I knew intellectually that his illness was merely a display and that he had lowered himself to the level of an asthmatic human being for my sake. But as I listened to him struggle for breath, it was hard to believe that his asthma attack was a product of my own impure perception; that, in reality, Kyabje Rinpoche was beyond being asthmatic and not asthmatic. My point here is that, although a thorough training in the expedient teachings exists and is teachable, it takes time to sink in.

When we take refuge, we apply the skilful method of visualizing the Buddha and all the objects of refuge in the sky above us. But, to put it crudely, this method is flawed – something a skilled, qualified teacher would know all about. As far as tantra is concerned, rank, hierarchy, higher and lower don't even register. Tantra couldn't care less about whether the buddhas are in the sky above us, sitting next to us, or lying below us. So why do the sacred texts specify that the objects of refuge are in the sky above us? Because human beings prefer it that way. We prefer to look up to our saviours. The tantric texts tell us to visualize the buddhas above us because it suits how we think. Tantric wisdom itself couldn't care less.

At the end of refuge practice, the objects of refuge and the practitioner – the refugee – become one. Compared with the previous teaching, this dissolution is a flawless, direct teaching and closer to wisdom than skilful means. But in comparison with the next level of teaching, it is an expedient teaching.

Intellectually, the distinctions between the two truths and the paradox or union of the two truths are difficult to grasp. It takes a great deal of time and practice for most students to fathom their meaning.

I have noticed that Dharma students including my own Dharma friends and students, especially in western Dharma centres, get extremely anxious and stressed out about the details of Vajrayana rituals. They argue so vehemently over a technique or method or sadhana practice that, in the end, the whole thing has to be clarified and explained all over again, often from scratch. With students squabbling over the height of the shrine, which flowers should be offered, what is recommended and what is prohibited, and so on, the performance of the simplest ritual ends up creating havoc. Time and again, practical Vajrayana details overshadow, even obscure, a practitioner's understanding of the absolute truth; all the practical details are mere illusions. At the other end of the scale,

some practitioners are too lazy, stingy or lethargic to be bothered with rituals. They use ‘everything is emptiness’ as an excuse for doing nothing, and their intellectual understanding of shunyata hijacks all their opportunities for accumulating merit and purifying defilements.

Expedient and direct, relative and absolute are not the only categories the Buddhist teachings talk about. Other categories include wisdom and compassion, shunyata and compassion, bliss and emptiness and many others. None of these categorizations are exclusive to the Mahayana/Bodhisattvayana and Vajrayana/Tantrayana vehicles; they are also taught in the Theravada/Shravakayana. What if the Theravadin wisdom teaching on selflessness (*anattā*) were removed from the system? What would be left? A moralistic, discipline-oriented, litany of rules and regulations. The Theravadin values of humility, contentment, asceticism, simplicity and lifestyle – begging for food and eating once a day – would become a practitioner’s ultimate goal. As a mental training, being disciplined and following the rules isn’t that hard to accomplish – it might even be good for the environment – but it has nothing to do with the ultimate goal of the Theravada, which is to go beyond clinging to self. Discipline, obedience and so on, are merely the fringe benefits.

Mindfulness practice, which is one of the vipashyana’s basic ingredients, is an excellent example of how teachings can so easily be derailed. When applied outside a Buddhist context, vipashyana’s mindfulness is stripped of the view of the three characteristics: *aniccā* (impermanence), *duḥkha* (suffering) and *anattā* (selflessness and wisdom) – relative truth and absolute truth, skilful means and wisdom combined. All that is left is the basic technique. The simple technique of mindfulness is now extremely popular as a method for relieving stress and depression, curing insomnia and promoting good health. And it’s true that, without *anattā*, mindfulness can be a great stress-reliever. But without *anattā*, mindfulness has nothing whatsoever to do with vipashyana.

Is teary-eyed devotion the ultimate goal of the Vajrayana? If it were, it would be relatively easy to achieve. Isn't teary-eyed devotion what all the sycophantic fundamentalists and fanatical political and religious activists in the world feel? Take your pick of news media and you will find dozens of articles about the devastating extremes devoted radicals go to in the name of their beliefs. So yes, teary-eyed devotion is easy to achieve. But as the point of Vajrayana is to realise that you are a buddha, it's not that simple.

Beyond Belief

Nagarjuna tells us that, long ago, having transcended belief himself, the Buddha gave his quintessential teachings about how to shrug belief off altogether. To go beyond belief, without exaggerating the absolute truth or underestimating the relative truth, is the goal of the Buddhist path. I wonder if Stephen Batchelor's reluctance to accept the notion of reincarnation is a symptom of having underestimated the relative truth. Such an underestimation is equivalent to the MIT physicist throwing away his son's panda. If Buddhist practitioners continue to underestimate the relative truth and overestimate the absolute truth, it will become impossible for them to go beyond Buddhist beliefs altogether.

It seems to me that most of the great Indian thinkers of the past, especially the Buddha, saw everything as a paradox. A number of western thinkers would probably agree, but only to a point. As far as I can tell, only the Buddha taught an entire range of techniques to help us live with and enjoy paradox, and to prevent us from preferring one side of a contradiction to the other.

I would like to stress and repeat once again that Buddha taught in paradoxes because *everything is paradoxical*. Like a rainbow, it is there and, at the same time, it is not there. When a beautiful rainbow

appears in a clear blue sky, if you try to get close enough to take the perfect selfie the rainbow will disappear. No rainbow, no selfie.

Every morning for the past fifty-nine years, I have looked at my face in the bathroom mirror. Not once has that face become the face of a baboon holding a banana. Two things happen when I look in a mirror: I see the reflection of my face and simultaneously, I am aware that my face isn't actually in the mirror. This is the paradox that lies at the root of how everything appears: democracy, eastern values, western values, gender, critical thinking, blind faith, colour, shape, art, music. Everything is paradoxical. But if you haven't yet realised the essence of a paradox, you might try to apply lipstick to the lips of your reflection, which can only result in frustration and 'unsatisfactoriness' (*duḥkha*).

Every morning, the Buddha walked barefoot to a village in Magadha to beg for food. Before he set out, he made sure that his followers were properly dressed. After they returned, the Buddha taught the *Vajracchedikā Sūtra* (the *Diamond-Cutter Sutra*) and pointed out that not only do Magadha, begging bowls, alms, monk's robes, an ascetic way of life and samsara not exist, but neither does nirvana. A nightmare can make you sweat, kick off your bedclothes and push your spouse out of bed, said the Buddha, but even a nightmare is just a dream. And nothing you dream really happens.

An accomplished yogi experiences life as if it were a movie: it is there and, at the same time, it is not there. Most of the rest of us become so emotionally involved in a movie that we cover our eyes when the action gets too frightening and weep bitterly when our favourite characters get bumped off. It's there, and it's not there. If it is so easy to get sucked into a movie that is so obviously there and not there, what chance do we have of seeing everything else we experience in life as there and not there – from a dewdrop on a blade of grass, to parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech, social harmony, elections, polygamy, monogamy, money and personal space? Once we truly appreciate the paradoxical, we can look at our own lives

in the same way that we mourn the death of our favourite onscreen character until that movie ends, and have forgotten all about them by the time the sequel is released. This is called liberation. Liberation is knowing that it's there, and it's not there, releasing us from the pain of holding onto either or both.

Only the Vajrayana teaches a genuine appreciation of the paradoxical fully and painlessly. From the sprinkling of purification water to the many-headed deities sitting on sun and moon discs resting on fragile lotuses, the main ingredient of all Vajrayana techniques is the paradox of 'appearance and emptiness'. This paradox makes it possible for students to witness how excited their yawning, sleepy, stubborn guru gets when he is offered expensive gifts and how quickly he flies off the handle when he reads any negative press, yet continue to see him as the embodiment of all the buddhas.

The Paradox of Guru, Student and Guru Yoga

The quintessence of the practice of guru yoga is, in the words of the sacred texts, to "reach the state of the guru". A more practice-oriented description is 'to unite my mind with the mind of my guru' as the guru and the practitioner dissolve into each other at the conclusion of guru yoga. I am sure readers of this book know enough about the Vajrayana to realise that "reach the state of the guru" does not mean the student takes over the guru's job, but this is an example of the kind of paradox I am talking about.

Guru yoga was designed to dismantle all of phenomenal existence, including hierarchy. Yet the moment devotion is mentioned, our dualistic minds instantly presume a hierarchy. If we didn't, how could we aspire to reach the same state as the guru? This is another reason why, as I mentioned earlier, the aim of a tantrika has never been to practise devotion for all eternity. If you believe that as gurus and students exist in the relative world, the student must therefore

feel devotion for their guru forever, your practice is bound to hit a brick wall. Why? Because your guru yoga practice will always be limited by your need for the physical presence of your guru. How will you practise guru yoga when your guru is dead? Will his death signal the end of your practice? Are Vajrayana practitioners being idealistic, even romantic, when we pray never to be separated from our guru, from now until enlightenment? No, because you and your guru are by nature inseparable. Therefore, when you pray never to be separated, your prayer is based on how things really are, not how you wish they were. It's like looking at a lump of gold ore and seeing pure gold.

Spiritual paths are constructed based on identifying problems and providing solutions. The path identifies a problem and applies the appropriate solution. Therefore the problems and solutions are the path. Initially, when you look at a dirty cup, it's the dirt that appears to be the problem, and your immediate solution is to wash the dirt away with some soap. But as the cup is not the dirt, the ultimate solution is to recognize that the cup is not inherently dirty. As Lord Maitreya said, the ultimate solution is buddha nature. If you understand the word 'guru' to mean the 'illuminator', the one who guides you, your ultimate guide must be the nature of your mind and, as you already have buddha nature, your outer guru must be the soap. This is why praying never to be separated from your guru is neither a romantic conceit nor wishful thinking.

An experienced dish washer looks at a pile of filthy cups and thinks, "Easy! This lot will be clean in no time." Where does his confidence come from? It has nothing to do with the quality or quantity of the soap and everything to do with the fact that the dishwasher knows that the cups are not inherently dirty. He knows that the dirt is separate from the cups. It would be a different matter if you asked him to wash a lump of shit. No matter how much soap this excellent dishwasher applied to the shit, all he would be able to do is wash away the entire turd.

By the way, I corrected the dishwasher example from its original ‘her’ to ‘him’ to avoid being accused of gender stereotyping.

The paradox here is that as students, we must make an effort to visualize the guru as the Buddha *before* we can truly see her as the Buddha. And the point of practising visualization is to see ourselves as the Buddha.

All this works if you get ‘it’s there, and it’s not there’ – which is far easier said, read and contemplated than lived. Why? The obvious reason, as I have already said, is that the viewer is in denial and refuses to look at the view, relying instead on the deeply ingrained habit of separating clarity and emptiness. We separate ‘it’s there, and it’s not there’ because we long to find *the* answer, *the* solution, *the* explanation, and we expect that answer to be a black and white solution with no trace of paradox. We also want and expect the answer to be easy to follow and dualistic (this is right, that is wrong), largely because we have no wish to deal with the paradox of ‘it’s there, and it’s not there’.

“Keep it Secret! Keep it Safe!”

UNLIKE THE TIBETANS, Indian tantric practitioners have always been extremely elusive. Consequently, they have successfully kept their tantric practices safe and secure. We therefore have no idea who they are or what they do. Indian tantrikas probably look just like India's other holy men – long hair, long beards, and bodies smeared with mysterious substances. Whenever I single out one of these holy men, thinking he might well be a tantrika, my sceptical Indian friends smile indulgently and disagree. My choice must be a charlatan, they say, because genuine tantrikas hide in the mountains, or live inconspicuous lives on the banks of Ganges or the platform of one of India's chaotic train stations. Some even hold down jobs – possibly as the particular breed of Indian bureaucrat that has mastered the art of saying “No!”

After centuries of impenetrable secrecy, is it any wonder that ordinary people are suspicious of the Vajrayana tradition? Or that it is labelled a cult? After all, no one knows what Vajrayana practitioners do. And simply because they are so secretive, we automatically assume the worst. For all we know, the big secret that lies at the heart of the Indian Vajrayana tradition may not be a bizarre, voodooesque mandala, but a small pile of flower petals.

How much of today's mistrust of the Vajrayana can be traced back to India's British colonizers, whose Christian morals, ethics and values grew increasingly puritanical throughout Queen Victoria's reign? Although fascinated by the Indian natives, most British Christians believed that all forms of spiritual practice outside the Christian canon were necessarily savage and primitive. To them, Vajrayana shrines smacked of devil worship. Nevertheless, keen

amateur anthropologists, linguists and natural scientists, whose day jobs kept the wheels of British India turning, meticulously recorded all their experiences, impressions and discoveries and sent them home. Every word was devoured and mulled over by scholars in the great British universities, and illustrious members of the Royal Society wrote fascinating papers about India's cultures and religions, which helped feed popular interest in all things Indian. The British Colonialists believed that by building an empire they were serving Queen and country. Equally importantly, they believed they were doing God's work. The Victorians, in particular, were convinced that the entire world needed modernizing, educating, and organizing, and that they were the ones to do it.

All of which begs the repetition of my question, how much of the British colonial attitude continues to underpin the present-day western view of the Vajrayana? The colonial mindset is still deeply ingrained in the British psyche and continues to affect contemporary attitudes to such a degree that it is no longer an exclusively British phenomenon. That very same, puritanical, self-righteous mindset has become one of the modern mind's most subtle defilements.

Naked, fanged images of Indian deities like Kali did not encourage the British to revise their opinion that India was a country of savages. The Victorians did not approve of nakedness, and most would have assumed that devotion for Kali had something to do with devil worship. If one of Queen Victoria's envoys had been present at a recital of poems in praise of Kali, he would have heard verses about men and women who willingly made the 'ultimate sacrifice'. To the Kali devotee, the poems are about the spiritual sacrifice of the self. To a 19th century British diplomat, the words 'ultimate sacrifice' meant 'death', so he may well have jumped to the conclusion that the Indians practised human sacrifice. And he could hardly have avoided hearing sensational stories about the brutality of the Thuggees, who had been ritually murdering travellers in the name of Kali for centuries. Of course, the Thug cult was far from representative of

India's Kali devotees, in the same way that the world's more than one billion Catholics are not all IRA assassins. But this kind of cultural misunderstanding was all the justification the British needed to colonize the Indian subcontinent and civilize the ignorant, heathen natives in the name of saving their souls.

Incidentally, it is as well to remember that for the seven hundred years before the British came along, India had been ruled by Muslims. Like Christians and Jews, who also believe in the one God, Muslims are vehemently opposed to idol worship. What, I wonder, did they make of monkey-headed Hanuman?

Under British rule and influence, the Indian elite began to feel embarrassed by their ancient culture and consciously watered down what modern journalists have labelled the 'Kali Cult' – but which I call the 'Kali Tantra'. As a result, much of that remarkable wisdom has now been lost. Originally, Kali was associated with the inescapable passage of time. Today, the Kali Tantra's exquisite philosophy has been diluted to such a degree that the goddess Kali now represents romantic love. Try telling Byron Bay hippies that Kali is the ruthless, unforgiving, unstoppable passage of time and they will burst out laughing because, for them, Kali is the goddess of love. And which Kali sells better?

Tibet

For a long time, Guru Padmasambhava refused to mention his guru's name to another human being. Biographies of the masters of the past tell us that tantric masters always kept their path, their guru, the mantras they recited, and their tantric implements and objects hidden from sight. Such masters still existed even in my lifetime. Although as a community, the Tibetans have generally failed to conceal tantric practice, a few individuals managed to do it quite well. One such master was my philosophy teacher, Khenpo

Appey Rinpoche. We all knew that he was a great tantric practitioner and scholar, but not once did I even glimpse his mala. His room in Nepal was bare and simple. He owned so little that the moment you crossed his threshold you could see everything he possessed. I often tried to spot his mala, but he had always tucked it away before I arrived. His shrine was generally made up of a Buddha statue, water offerings and a mandala plate. The last time I visited him, just before he died, I noticed he had added a plate full of biscuits, fruit, sweets and grain mixed together, which is a very obvious tantric ritual substance called ‘torma’ and definitely not something Khenpo would have snacked on. It was the only time I ever saw anything tantric in Khenpo Appey’s room.

Gone are the days when masters upheld the Vajrayana as Khenpo Appey did. If I were to tell my Tibetan colleagues this story they would stare open-mouthed. Most wouldn’t believe me. Today, wherever I look, I see Vajrayana-inspired t-shirts, screen savers, posters and exotic malas openly displayed.

Individual practitioners can, if we choose, keep the Vajrayana secret. It’s up to us – how could anyone stop us? I myself know western Dharma students who are the opposite of gullible and who present themselves as dyed in the wool empiricists or scientists. They openly mock rituals, yet secretly practise tantra. Knowing that these covert practitioners exist raises my spirits and fills me with the hope that tantra will continue to flourish in this world, albeit surreptitiously. I wish you could all experience the bliss a practitioner who pretends not to practise feels. Today’s Vajrayana practitioners do the exact opposite! They flaunt both themselves and their practices in a mistaken attempt at experiencing that very same bliss. Many of today’s misunderstandings about the Vajrayana could have been avoided if both student and guru had done as they should and never spoken of their relationship and path.

Guru Rinpoche refused even to speak his own guru’s name, yet Tibetans plaster the names of their gurus all over the place. Some

gurus emulate western doctors and dentists by fixing shiny brass nameplates engraved with their Vajrayana affiliations to their front doors. Even so, I would sooner you went to a guru with a brass nameplate who is willing to talk about his own guru and faithful to his guru's lineage, than to one of those self-arising gurus who pop up overnight like mushrooms, and whose every utterance has been plagiarized.

In many ways, it's almost more important to keep the Vajrayana secret from Shravakayana and Bodhisattvayana Buddhists than from lay people and non-Buddhists. The Vajrayana has always been controversial simply because it has never courted public opinion. Why draw attention to it now? If you are determined to present a spiritual path to the general public, there are plenty of other Buddhist teachings you could talk about. For instance, all the beautiful, serene, convincing and inspiringly earthy Shravakayana and Theravadin teachings; or the courageous, compassionate, broad-minded, far-sighted, big-hearted Mahayana teachings. Where necessary, these paths skilfully bow to social expectations, in the same way a serious-minded, physically awkward father is willing to try to make his children laugh by dancing like a bear or imitating Miss Piggy.

The Vajrayana in general – especially the Anuttarayoga (the Unexcelled Yoga Tantra) – is not like that. The Vajrayana was not designed to be compatible with samsaric life. The aim of both the Shravakayana and the Mahayana is to break us out of our accustomed box, while the teachings themselves are given from inside that box. In the Vajrayana, everything happens outside the box from the word go. Do you want to be in or out? It has to be one or the other. It is not possible to leave one foot in the box while reaping all the benefits of being outside it. But this doesn't mean that the Vajrayana disagrees in any way with the Shravakayana and the Mahayana – far from it. The Vajrayana accepts the teachings of all the other yanas and adds something extra. Regardless of the misunderstandings, which are unavoidable, if you are convinced

that the Vajrayana makes sense and is the right path for you, just keep your head down and be discrete.

The tantric texts explain in great detail why the Vajrayana, Tantrayana and Mantrayana should be kept secret.

1. Tantra is ‘Self-secret’

Everyone has buddha nature and so everyone is a buddha. However, few of us know that we have buddha nature because it is self-secret. Maitreya explained this wonderfully well in the *Uttaratantra*. If you are interested in finding out more about what Maitreya said (the teaching is known as the ‘four paradoxes’), try reading, or better still, studying the *Uttaratantra*.

The point here is that it’s because our innate buddha nature is self-secret and all beings are buddhas that the Vajrayana masters’ methods for maintaining the necessary secrecy are so mind-boggling. For instance, I would have no qualms about reading the *Three Words of Garab Dorje* to my donkey, but the mere thought of reading it to a Harvard graduate or, worse still, a shedra-trained khenpo, immediately puts me on edge. As the donkey has (self-secret) buddha nature, reading the *Three Words* out loud in his hearing creates the causes and conditions for him to bump into this teaching in a future life. I am comfortable about doing this because the chances of the donkey breaking the Vajrayana samayas with me are very slim. And quite a number of other methods create the same kind of connection, for example, liberation through hearing, liberation through seeing, liberation through touching and so on.

Unlike the donkey, the mind of a Harvard graduate is usually stuffed to the gills with concepts, reasoning and logic, which is why reading her the *Three Words of Garab Dorje* is a bit risky. If she is as open-minded as intellectuals claim to be (and should be), and if she is uncontaminated by a religious upbringing, she may well be a good vessel for this teaching. Why? Because the *Three Words* perfectly exemplifies empiricism. It uses no examples and no logical

arguments; it is a direct ‘pointing out’. A truly open-minded Harvard graduate might appreciate this kind of approach; it might even inspire her to start practising Ngöndro, which would be great. But of course, open-minded Harvard graduates are rare. Most highly educated intellectuals are just as proud and prejudiced as many Rabbinical Jews, Jesuits and fundamentalist, Madrasa-trained Imams, all of whom harbour oceans of preconceptions. I would therefore be very cautious about revealing the *Three Words* to a Harvard graduate.

The most dubious candidate might be the kind of learned Buddhist scholar we call a ‘khenpo’. Why? Teaching the *Three Words of Garab Dorje* to a Harvard graduate would be like explaining the difference between a nugget of gold and a lump of shit: both are yellowish in colour, but that is where the similarity ends. Teaching it to a khenpo, who knows about shunyata and has a fair idea about rigpa, would be like trying to explain the difference between highly polished brass and pure gold. Highlighting the disparities between Islamic and Vajrayana philosophies is easy, but distinguishing Kashmiri Shivaism from the Vajrayana is virtually impossible. When two philosophies are that similar, any attempt at differentiating one from the other is not only difficult, it’s dangerous. Tantra is self-secret because it is so easy to misunderstand. Donkeys are unable to understand anything at all, therefore they cannot misunderstand the *Three Words of Garab Dorje* – which is why it’s safe to read them the pointing out instructions. Khenpos have far more chance of misunderstanding it because they are already familiar with similar teachings.

A modern example is the difference between accomplishing a calm, stress-free mind by applying the technique of mindfulness, and attaining complete and perfect enlightenment. These two states of mind are similar, yet entirely different – like brass and gold. Most people assume that once you attain enlightenment, you will be free of emotion, stress, hope and fear, and that you will no longer experience life’s emotional ups and downs. Those who practise the

popular technique of mindfulness assume that their stress-free mind is much the same as the state of enlightenment. It isn't. Mindfulness people's stress-free mind is like brass, whereas enlightenment is like gold. And it is because this mistake is so easy to make that tantra is said to be self-secret.

2. Tantra is Easy to Misunderstand and Misuse

When camphor is used correctly it relieves pain; when it isn't, it kills. Vajrayana teachings, like 'taking emotions as the path', are just as easy to misuse. A student might, for instance, try to justify his next temper tantrum as a way of practising 'taking emotions as the path', rather than doing what he's supposed to do, which is just to watch the flow of his anger.

3. Tantra is so Precious

Tantra is like a family heirloom that is passed down through dozens of generations. Imagine that your family owns the first Leica camera ever produced. Eventually, you want to give it to your son, but right now he is thirteen years old and habitually trades his possessions for gaming paraphernalia. Would you tell him where the safe holding the Leica camera is hidden? Would you give him the combination?

Perhaps a better way of expressing the need to keep the Vajrayana secret is to explain that no one should hear a word of Vajrayana until they have been thoroughly and properly prepared. Would you teach a thirteen-year-old how to combine household products to make a bomb?

The Vajrayana is not the only path that requires newcomers to undergo some form of preparation before they begin. The great Mahayana sutras are packed full of advice about not teaching shunyata to fledgling practitioners who could easily misunderstand and fall into nihilism. And the Theravadin tradition is far more likely to present teachings on *aniccā* (impermanence) and *duḥkha* (suffering)

to a beginner, than to introduce them to *anattā* (emptiness) straight away.

How might a worldly, curious person react if, at a talk entitled “An Introduction to Buddhism”, the first concepts explained were *impermanence*, *shunyata* and the indivisibility of samsara and nirvana? Would parents wanting to set a good example for kids and to be good life coaches, introduce their eight-year-old to Buddhism with a lecture about *shunyata*? With a bit of luck, an eight-year-old wouldn’t understand a word, but he might be left with the unshakeable, nihilistic conviction that life is meaningless. Should you explain impermanence, shunyata, and how ‘bad’ and ‘good’ are not separate to a seriously depressed, lonely woman who turned up at your Dharma centre looking for company and emotional support?

It’s not easy to guide a person towards the Vajrayana path and often it’s enormously challenging. But as long as a person is willing to be led and has the capacity to follow the path, it’s not impossible. The Vajrayana knows no boundaries and is not limited by a sense of time, so its teachings work just as well in the modern world as they did in ancient times.

As I have already said and will continue to say, none of the tantric texts even hint at the idea that a student should immediately be bombarded with Vajrayana teachings the moment they show an interest in Buddhadharma. As the great Hevajra Tantra recommends, newcomers should be taught the most basic precepts first, followed by all the stages of the path and schools of philosophy. Neither the guru nor the disciples who run Dharma centres should even think of explaining guru devotion to a newcomer. When newer students are present, a guru’s older students must be very careful about how they relate to their guru. As Buddhist practitioners, our behaviour must always be appropriate to the place and time.

Disciples who brag about their devotion can land themselves and their guru in hot water. Some of my own so-called students regularly share my leftovers with my lunch guests, some of whom

are barely Buddhist. I can't remember the number of times I have had to patch things up with utterly bewildered new acquaintances, after finding them staring, open-mouthed, at a piece of papaya with my teeth marks in it that had just been presented to them with great reverence, as if it were a sacred relic. Students who put their guru's socks and shoes on for him in front of people who have nothing to do with the Vajrayana are just asking for trouble. For the sake of the good name of the Buddhadharma, don't make a spectacle of your guru-student interactions. Don't be a sycophant and don't be an arse-kisser. Public displays of this kind have already damaged the Vajrayana's reputation and if students continue to behave in this way, the entire Buddhadharma's credibility will be utterly ruined.

Now that the Vajrayana is being discussed publicly and in such detail, visitors to your Dharma centre may start asking questions about it. If possible, try to avoid talking about the Vajrayana altogether. Focus instead on the beautiful and completely risk-free Theravadin teachings, which are a far better starting point than shunyata. Talk about impermanence and how life never brings us ultimate satisfaction. Concentrate on wholesome, convincing, down-to-earth teachings. If you are asked about the Mahayana, highlight the bodhisattva's tremendous motivation to enlighten all sentient beings. Point out that as we all have buddha nature, the enlightenment of all sentient beings is a real possibility, not just wishful thinking.

You can share simple techniques like being mindful of your breath or the sensations in your body because it belongs to the empirical world that appreciates the obvious, measurable benefits mindfulness can bring. But the statement 'pray to the guru' should never pass the lips of a Vajrayana practitioner. Why? Because everything to do with using desire as a path must be kept secret. Many Tibetans wouldn't think twice about telling someone to pray to the guru. In a way, it sounds quite harmless, but praying to the guru is actually an exclusive tantric practice that should be kept just

as secret as paintings of deities in union. If you pray to your guru, you are praying to a living, breathing human being, which could so easily be misunderstood – especially these days.

If you are unable to avoid mentioning the Vajrayana, emphasize the Vajrayana view that everything is pure. At all costs, avoid mentioning the more advanced techniques of guru devotion, pure perception and unquestioning obedience to the guru. Instead, explain that, according to the Vajrayana, we are all already buddhas – including our noisy, angry neighbours – but none of us have realised it yet. Later on, when the new person is ready to hear more, tell them that, according to the Mahayana, we become buddhas after a long and arduous journey.

The Vajrayana’s message is a little different because it tells us that the journey is the goal. It also tells us that we are already buddhas and all we need to do is realise our true nature and act accordingly. It is not wise to extol the power and effectiveness of techniques like guru devotion until much later. Start by teaching the technique of shamatha, then gradually introduce vipashyana. Once new students have got a handle on basic vipashyana, introduce the inseparability of appearance and emptiness, which is a higher level of vipashyana known as utpattikrama (kyerim) and sampannakrama (dzogrim). Only then can you start talking about the quintessence of vipashyana, which is guru devotion.

Try not to let scandals and criticisms discourage you. And don’t allow yourself to be persuaded that the Vajrayana is not for this time. The tantric texts tell us that the Vajrayana is tailor-made for this modern world. So rest assured that those who have a thirst for the truth, good analytical skills, a longing for objectivity, a need for empirical proof and a healthy mistrust of even the best reasons for trusting, are the perfect vessels for the Vajrayana teachings. If, that is, they are willing to give tantra a go.

The Prerequisites of the Vajrayana Path

MANY OF THE poets, musicians, artists and inevitable potheads who fled the Vietnam draft and their capitalist homelands to follow the hippy trail to India, were motivated by the wish to discover an alternative way of life and nirvana. But what did they understand nirvana to be?

Motivation

A cave-dwelling Burmese monk who dedicates his life to vipashyana practice is looking for a completely different kind of nirvana to a Byron Bay hippy. I wonder how the peace-loving hippies would react if the Burmese monk told them that their sole motivation for practising Dharma should be to dismantle this very self so as to expose the truth that there is no self. If there is no self, who would look for nirvana? Who would reach nirvana? If the idea of a self is an illusion, then the wish to attain nirvana must also be an illusion. How would the hippies feel if they were told that there is no one to motivate and nothing to do? That their motivation should be to have no motivation at all? How would they react?

Ideally, as a Buddhist practitioner you have already accepted, at least to some extent, that the illusory world is flawed. You probably now feel an urgent longing to free yourself from all delusion and to attain the state in which there are no dualistic distinctions. This is what motivates you to seek out the right path and the right guide – a guru, a master. In fact, this is what should motivate all of us to follow a guru, but it often isn't.

Most Himalayan peoples, especially the Tibetans, relate to their gurus as political leaders, heads of monasteries, money lenders, doctors and soothsayers. For some, the guru is little more than a warm body to help keep loneliness at bay. Instead of using the guru as the path that helps them detach themselves from the illusory world and actualize non-duality, the guru binds and chains them to their delusions. ‘Non-duality’ becomes just another word.

Motivation is extremely important. Ideally, we follow a spiritual path motivated by the wish to accomplish the awakened state – enlightenment. But how can we make that wish if we don’t know what enlightenment really is? How can someone want to drink mint tea if they don’t know what it tastes like? Buddha’s solution is to repeatedly encourage us to listen to and contemplate the teachings. The Vajrayana is no exception. To sell someone the benefits of drinking mint tea, we describe how it smells and tastes, and tell stories about its exotic history. Its health benefits are also talked up, as well as anything else that might make mint tea seem more attractive. To sell students the idea of practising the Vajrayana path, a Vajrayana teacher talks enthusiastically about how painless and quick its methods are. He tells us that by applying them, it is possible to attain enlightenment in one lifetime.

So, one of the first pieces of advice the Buddha gave his students was to hear, contemplate and practise the teachings. ‘Hearing and contemplation’ means listening to and making sure you thoroughly understand every word of a teaching. It’s not enough to listen to a teaching as you would an interesting podcast while you jog or clean the fridge. ‘Hearing and contemplation’ has been taught millions of times over the centuries, yet few practitioners pay it the attention it deserves. Have you ever wondered, for example, why ‘hearing’ comes first? Or why ‘contemplation’ comes second and ‘practice’ or ‘analysis’ is always last? There has to be a reason for the order.

Let’s apply this advice to the example of drinking mint tea. One day, you hear about the benefits and virtues of drinking mint tea. You

then contemplate all you have heard and the following week decide to take up the practice of drinking a cup of mint tea every morning. As you have completed the practice of hearing and contemplation, your practice can be described as ‘benefiting from the advantages of drinking mint tea’. Your next-door neighbour also drinks a daily mug of something hot. He makes it with a spoonful of a green herbs, about which he knows nothing, steeped in hot water. He has no idea that he is drinking mint tea and has no clue about its benefits, he just likes the taste. As such, your neighbour cannot be said to be following an authentic mint-tea-drinking practice.

An authentic Vajrayana teacher is supposed to make hearing and contemplation mandatory for all his students. In reality, most Vajrayana students, including myself, are often too overwhelmed by our emotional responses – love for our guru, for example – to pay hearing and contemplation much attention. I am afraid this will not change.

Our gurus attract us in so many ways. You might, for example, be captivated by your guru’s good looks, his aura or all his fascinating props. Or you might love the Tibetan pomp and circumstance, or the fuss made by his attendants and monks, or the guru’s eloquent and persuasive teachings. These are all entirely acceptable reasons for being attracted to a guru that can and should be exploited. Nevertheless, both the authentic teacher and the authentic student must take care that they remain faithful to their original aim and vision. It’s so important that neither of you get side-tracked. The student must always remember that his goal is to break free from this dualistic net, not just get high on it. And the teacher must never forget that her job is not merely to give impressive teachings and expound convincing arguments, but to make absolutely certain that each student attains or uncovers the state of non-duality.

According to the Mahayana, our teachers are the doctors and we students are their patients. In the same way that a doctor must talk to and examine a patient in order to make a diagnosis, lamas

must interact with their students. But today in the West, most Tibetan lamas barely know their students' names, let alone what their problems are, what bothers and perplexes them, or what they really need. Few lamas have tried to understand their new audience's background or even attempted to educate them properly. Yet, in the same way that the doctor should be motivated by a wish to heal a patient, a lama's every action should be motivated by the wish to lead the student to enlightenment. So, both the student's and the lama's motivation are equally important.

The Prerequisites

Mozart was a musical prodigy. He wrote his first musical pieces almost before he could walk and was playing for Vienna's Imperial Court at the age of six. Unless you are to the Vajrayana what Mozart was to music – which in Vajrayana terms is a 'disciple of superior faculties' – you will need step-by-step guidance and an exhaustive spiritual training. Even a genius like Mozart had to be taught musical techniques and skills – in his case, by his father who was a professional musician. The Vajrayana system has always insisted that a Vajrayana student must be guided by an authentic Vajrayana guru and that the Vajrayana's meticulous and methodical training should be conducted in absolute secrecy.

It also insists that the Vajrayana teachings should never be made available to anyone who had not first been properly prepared by an authentic Vajrayana teacher. Why? For the same reason a nuclear scientist would never think of giving his son an atomic bomb to play with.

In recent years, the need for preparation for the Vajrayana path has been overlooked, not just by the gurus, but by students attracted to the allure and exoticism of the swiftest of all spiritual paths. Some students were so determined to receive these teachings quickly that

they went out of their way to extract them from tantric masters whose kindness and naivety got the better of them.

Some of the very greatest of masters dealt with this problem rather more skilfully – I know about this method because I saw masters apply it myself. The master would agree to give persistent students the teachings they kept requesting, even though they were not yet ready to receive them or the time was not right. Then as he taught, he would quote from all the authentic source materials, without mentioning a word of clarification from the commentaries. Having given his eager students a convincing patchwork of authentic quotations, the master had both satisfied the students' request and avoided giving them more information than they were ready to hear.

Some great masters were impossible to blackmail, terrorize or lure into giving teachings that ambitious, pushy new students were not yet ready for. But the sweeter, more timid and touchingly kind lamas were easier to manipulate because they were unwilling to run the risk of breaking a new student's heart. This is why the kindest, gentlest lamas sometimes gave students teachings they were not ready for. And, of course, the materially ambitious lamas who longed for fame and thousands of students were easy prey – all the old psychology is just as valid here as it is in all walks of life. Ultimately, whether certain teachings are given or not boils down to the laws of supply and demand.

Almost all the tantric texts, such as the Hevajra Tantra, insist that students should first be taught the Vaibhashika view. This is like telling an Iranian man that before he can enrol in an elite sumo wrestling course in Tokyo, he must first learn Japanese. Sumo wrestling has nothing to do with the Japanese language, but in order to study sumo wrestling in Japan, the Iranian man must be able to understand and speak the language. Teaching the Vaibhashika view to a new tantric student is like teaching the Iranian man Japanese.

Traditionally, the Vajrayana always systematically took a student through all the different views presented by each of the philosophical

schools. This approach is virtually unknown today – a situation that itself is mind-boggling. Without a thorough understanding of the Vaibhashika view, there can be no ground for mutual understanding between the teacher and the student and no clear lines of communication – it would be a bit like trying to teach quantum physics to a cat. And the tantric texts don't stop there. Tantra strongly encourages would-be Vajrayana students to establish a solid foundation of Buddhist knowledge and experience before embarking on the Vajrayana: first, the Sautrāntika teachings, followed by the Chittamatra, then the Madhyamika.

The Anuyoga Tantra epitomizes tantric teachings on non-duality. However, before it is taught, students must first be introduced to duality. What is 'duality'? What is 'non-duality'? What is it that must be non-dual? This, the tantric texts clearly state, is the first thing a student needs to know. When an astrophysics teacher gives a class about the big bang, he first describes the universe as it is today. Once that context has been clearly mapped out, he can go on to describe the theory of how it all began – the big bang. But the theory will only make sense if the students already have a good idea of what the universe is.

One or two of Trungpa Rinpoche's older students told me that he did not give them the Vajrayogini abhisheka until they had been following his teachings for about five years. By then, they had already received the teachings on the three yanas and the Shambhala teachings about building confidence and working with their inner psychology. If true, this is how the Vajrayana should be taught.

One of my reasons for writing this book is that quite a number of lamas, not just Sogyal Rinpoche, have been giving teachings as high as atiyoga without first introducing students to the most basic Buddhist principles. Some of these lamas then demanded the unwavering devotion of these very new students. I should add that I have not witnessed this myself, the information was passed on to me by third parties whose reporting may have been selective.

However, I have met the students of some of these lamas, and from our conversations it became obvious that although they had certainly received atiyoga instructions, they didn't have a clue about the fundamental Buddhist teachings. This is why I have come to the conclusion that students have not been properly prepared by their lamas before receiving Vajrayana teachings.

At this point, I must remind you that I am a thoroughly deluded human being. As a Buddhist, I believe that *everything* I perceive is my own projection – my moral, spiritual and political values, the distinctions I make and even my personal sense of right and wrong. As my perception is mine alone, who am I to judge Sogyal Rinpoche, or anyone else, for that matter? I know that I am deluded and am clear in my own mind that what I am about to write is based entirely on my own dualistic projections. Nevertheless, it was always my impression that a major flaw in Sogyal Rinpoche's approach was that he failed to prepare his students properly for the Vajrayana teachings.

Of course, we must never forget that many Rigpa students feel they benefited enormously from Sogyal Rinpoche's style of teaching and remain steadfastly devoted to him. I have no argument with any of these students. If Sogyal Rinpoche's teachings truly benefited you, if you didn't just get high or blissed out on the atmosphere he created and if you genuinely reduced clinging both to your ego and to worldly life, then his teachings must have worked. We must always remember that Sogyal Rinpoche was not a self-proclaimed guru, he was part of an authentic lineage, which is why we can now scrutinize what went wrong in such detail. Hopefully, our exploration will be of use to future Vajrayana students. If Sogyal Rinpoche had been a self-proclaimed, mushroom guru, we would have no basis from which to examine his actions, no tradition to appeal to, no texts or teachings or advice to consult. And who could we have talked to about how and why things went wrong?

Try imagining a world full of Vajrayana teachers who fail to prepare their students for the Vajrayana teachings. These teachers

skip the traditional first step of introducing students to Buddhism's foundation teachings and don't bother to check whether or not students have fully and correctly understood what they are taught. Instead, these teachers launch straight into mahasandhi and mahamudra – the highest yoga tantra teachings.

There are two crucial points to think about here.

1. What if the Vajrayana teacher himself is completely ignorant? What if he does not know what to teach or how to teach it? All he does is repeat the phrases “rest in the nature of mind”, “be in the present moment”, and “don't dwell in the past or in the future”, then labels them as ‘mahasandhi’ or ‘dzogchen’. That's it. Yet, he goes on to say, “As I have given you the mahasandhi teachings, I am now your guru. You must do whatever I say. Turn your wallets inside out this instant!”
2. Let's assume the teacher is genuine and qualified to teach mahasandhi. Let's also assume that the student is not a disciple with superior faculties – which we know because when the teacher makes a special sign, the student does not ‘get it’. She is therefore taught the technique of ‘being in the present’ and, although she has received teachings on shamatha and vipashyana, she has not been properly prepared to receive a Vajrayana teaching.

In this example, the snag is that, although the teacher knows how to teach “rest in the nature of mind”, “be in the present moment”, “don't dwell in the past or in the future”, all these statements can also be found in the most basic shamatha and vipashyana teachings. The student therefore assumes she has heard it all before and that there is nothing special about mahasandhi. For the student, the loss is tremendous.

Ngöndro

Lamas often tell students that the first practice they should do on the Vajrayana path is Ngöndro. It is a good start. But we must bear in mind that Ngöndro is not just about accumulating numbers. We practice Ngöndro to develop a strong conviction in the truth of the teachings and to intensify our longing to leap out of the box we label ‘samsara’. By the way, samsara is not just an extra penthouse, extra car or extra gold necklace. Samsara includes all our hard-won human rights like freedom of speech and equal opportunities, worldly systems like parliamentary democracy and all our conditioning and preconceptions – everything we have learned and not learned.

Let’s say that for six years, you study Madhyamika with an excellent teacher. Having successfully completed your studies, your teacher’s final instruction is: “Now forget everything you have learned.” The essence of the Ngöndro is to develop a fundamental distrust of your education. Modern values encourage everyone to stuff their brains with as much information as they possibly can. Indian values – which, sadly, are now virtually extinct – encourage us to learn everything we can and then unlearn it.

Once we have developed an admiration for everything the Buddha said about dependent arising, shunyata and non-duality, his teachings begin to make sense. The more sense the teachings make, the more effort we put into escaping from this samsaric box through hearing and contemplation. These practices are indispensable to our escape plan and I cannot recommend them highly enough – particularly the teachings on the Buddhist view. Just one week’s study of Madhyamika will go a long way towards increasing your appreciation of the view, after which Ngöndro will take on an entirely new meaning. Instead of taking refuge in a man called Buddha who lived 2,500 years ago and looks like a bronze statue, refuge practice will become a surrendering to the truth, which is something like surrendering to the fact that ‘fire’ means ‘hot’. This is ‘taking refuge’.

Once you know that everything you think you perceive is just a projection, then an object and its label – vase, flowers and so on – are no longer separate or separable. You realise that your own perceptions are a delusion, and that delusion leads to ceaseless anxiety, pain and suffering. Gradually, you become convinced that to believe in a ‘self’ is the same as mistaking a scarecrow for a living human being. By this point, you have no qualms about crushing the ever-vigilant, difficult-to-catch cockroach of selfishness that, until now, has distracted you from genuinely caring for others. This makes it easy to practise considering others to be at least as important as yourself, if not more important. This is ‘arousing bodhichitta’.

You are now fully prepared and on your guard against anything that might distract you from the truth – the Vajrayana view. Whenever you spot a distraction, you sweep it away. This is ‘Vajrasattva’.

Eager to upgrade your understanding of the treasury of the truth, you read more books and listen to more teachings. Soon you realise that listening and reading alone do not give you the ability to understand the truth; that the very act of studying imprisons you in logic, reasoning and language. You need to burst the banks of your river of study and allow the water of knowledge to flow and spread. You need to break out of your self-created prison of logical thinking. This ability to break out is called ‘merit’, and merit takes many forms. Art appreciation can be taught and understood, but the truly innovative artists – Picasso for example – go out of their way to break as many rules as possible. The ability to break the rules is merit and merit sets you free. Once you realise this, piling rice on some stupid plate will take on a completely different meaning until, eventually, you will truly see a handful of rice as a galaxy. This is ‘mandala offering’.

Listening to and contemplating the teachings convinces you that your defilements are temporary and removable. Once all defilements have been removed, you temporarily label what is left as ‘buddha’.

You now long to expose and lay bare this buddha – your buddha nature – and the fastest method for revealing it is ‘Guru Yoga’.

By now, your enthusiasm for discovering the buddha within you will be as intense as my enthusiasm for the next El Clásico football match. When I watch football, what I long for is the unfabricated experience of watching live a brilliantly taken, tournament-winning penalty. If, at the very moment the penalty is taken, a friend distracts me with the offer of a cup of tea, I would probably consider it to be an obstacle.

As you practise Guru Yoga, your enthusiasm becomes so intense that whatever your guru asks you to do for him – make a photocopy or give him your new Mercedes – you do it joyfully. Having been thoroughly prepared to hear what to others sounds like gibberish – for example, ‘rest in the nature of mind’ – when the words finally trip off your guru’s tongue, they immediately make perfect sense. When your guru then says, “You must now do whatever I say” you feel a deep sense of honour and gratitude. It must feel something like being knighted by Queen Elizabeth.

TWELVE

The Vajrayana is Not for You

CULTURE AND TRADITION play a big part in whether or not we are able to accept the wisdom that is non-duality. The stories we hear about India's vast pantheon of deities are even more fabulous than those told in European fairy tales. In one story, Kali is in charge while all the other gods and goddesses hang on her every word, in the next, Shiva is running the show. The fluidity of every aspect of the Indian gods is apparent in much of India's ancient art. In one fresco, Lord Brahma is the central deity as Saraswati bows down to his lotus feet, and in another it's the other way around. Deities also take turns standing on top of each other. Shiva, the most powerful of the gods and the destroyer of worlds, is sometimes seen lying prone with Kali standing on top of him. In dozens of stories, Lord Ganesh, the elephant god, the god of wisdom, does the stupidest things.

The physical form of India's eminently adaptable gods is never fixed because their shape depends on the task they must accomplish. This kind of versatility permeates all of Indian culture. Unlike most other cultures, an Indian jinx, curse, omen or mascot is bad luck one day and good luck the next. Everyday life is fluid. Nothing is fixed or set in stone. What was inauspicious this morning will be auspicious by teatime, and vice versa.

I vividly remember flying from Delhi to Kerala in a plane full of beautifully dressed Hijra¹⁴. Apart from the cabin crew, I was the only non-Hijra on the flight. I was so surprised to see them that I couldn't stop myself from asking where they were going. To bless the marriage of the daughter of a very wealthy family, they said, their eyes sparkling with excitement and pride at having been invited to such an enormous society wedding. In the ordinary run of things, Hijra

are despised and shunned by most Indians because they are thought to be a bad omen. But at a wedding they are a holy substance and their presence brings blessings. They are therefore warmly welcomed to the celebrations and treated as honoured guests.

Indians are quite used to today's bad omen becoming tomorrow's auspicious sign, so tantra fits the Indian mind extremely well. We must never forget that the Vajrayana originated in India. Seeing all those Hijra on the plane that day and watching the cabin crew's tender kindness to them left me speechless. It made me wonder if my own Tibetan culture was anywhere near mature enough to soak up the duality that shuns a social group one day and honours it the next. Are the Tibetans as flexible as the Indians? Does Tibetan culture truly support 'non-duality' to the extent that Indian culture can and does?

A country's ethical and moral distinctions and brand of political correctness are rooted in its culture. If the story of Red Riding Hood were transported to India, Indian children might be told that the wolf, the bad guy, was actually a sublime being. Would that happen in Europe? Not today. Tibetan fairy tales are about good guys and bad guys, therefore relatively black and white. Indian myths and legends are quite different because, as a nation, the Indians are not only comfortable with non-duality, it is rooted in their very culture – possibly their DNA. The closest European equivalent to the Indian gods that I know of are the gods of ancient Greece. Zeus, Hera and Poseidon had no trouble being both wise and stupid, honest and criminal, jealous and proud, and they never minded appearing to be insane. Sadly, since Christianity supplanted the Greek pantheon, the Greek gods have been relegated to myths and legends, whereas the Indian gods are still worshipped today.

Manjushri is usually said to be a bodhisattva and the teacher of all the buddhas, but there is some ambiguity about who and what he really is. In one sentence, Mipham Rinpoche states that Manjushri is not blue, orange, white or green in colour, and in the next that

Manjushri can be blue or orange or white or green. Only in India are hierarchies turned upside down as the good and the bad flip-flop back and forth and deities switch places with their entourages. Versatility is the epitome of Indian culture.

Having said all that, India has changed a great deal in recent years. Seven centuries of Moghul domination, followed by two centuries of British rule, have taught Indians to be contemptuous of their culture's cheerful resilience and adaptability, preferring the clear distinctions of black and white, right and wrong to their country's rich and chaotic cultural heritage.

If you cannot appreciate flexibility and blurred lines, and if you dare not embark on the adventure of living without judgements or distinctions, the Vajrayana is not for you.

Human beings are perverse creatures. The moment we are told "this is not for you", whatever 'this' is, it is suddenly the only thing we want to do. So, as you read "the Vajrayana is not for you", your first thought might be that this statement alone proves the gossip-mongers are right and that I really am an elitist – even a racist. You are, of course, most welcome to make that distinction if you wish. But for your own sake, please think about your choice of path very carefully. Is the Vajrayana really your best option? It's a question you cannot think about often enough. Every single tantric text counsels and encourages students to think extremely carefully before leaping onto the tantric path. Ask yourself, "Am I really ready to receive tantric teachings and put them into practice?"

The sign of a good, qualified teacher is that she will always warn students about the consequences of making hasty decisions. Some continue urging even seasoned practitioners to think carefully about what they have signed up for, as if every day were day one.

Aspiring Vajrayana students encourage themselves by contemplating the Vajrayana's umpteen benefits. It is blissful, easy, offers an abundance of methods and doesn't require practitioners to engage in self-flagellation or do penance, and so on. But we must

never forget that if we break any of our promises there will be consequences, some of which are quite unsettling. So, examine your beliefs and feelings as closely as possible. It really helps. To help you get to grips with what it takes to be a Vajrayana student, ask yourself the following questions. At the very least, this exercise will give you food for thought.

What Does it Take to Be a Vajrayana Student?

1. A pebble cannot be a Vajrayana student. In other words, to follow the Vajrayana path you need a mind.

Do you have a mind?

Yes ☒ No ☐

As you can see, I've ticked the first box for you.

2. To follow the Vajrayana path you must also have buddha nature.

Do you have buddha nature?

Yes ☒ No ☐

Whether you believe it or not, this box automatically gets a big tick.

3. To follow the Vajrayana path, your emotional defilements must necessarily be temporary and removable.

Are your emotional defilements temporary and removable?

Yes ☒ No ☐

A Vajrayana practitioner's three most important qualities are: mind, buddha nature and emotional defilements. You don't need to worry about whether you have them or not because, like it or not,

mind, buddha nature and emotional defilements are facts of life for all human beings. What do you need defilements for? If there are no defilements, there is no path. What is the point of washing a cup if it isn't dirty?

4. To follow the Vajrayana path, you must recognize that this dualistic world and life are endlessly futile.

Do you see the futility of this worldly life?

Yes ☐ No ☐

5. To follow the Vajrayana path, you must long for liberation, not just for yourself but for all sentient beings.

Do you long to liberate yourself and all sentient beings?

Yes ☐ No ☐

6. To follow the Vajrayana path, you must understand and appreciate, at least intellectually, the union of appearance and emptiness – in other words 'paradox'.

Do you accept the paradoxical nature of the union of appearance and emptiness throughout all aspects of phenomenal existence?

Yes ☐ No ☐

7. To follow the Vajrayana path, you need to accept that everything you perceive is your own, unique projection. And I mean *everything*, from the book you are reading right now to Donald Trump's hair.

Do you accept that everything you perceive is your own, unique projection?

Yes ☐ No ☐

8. *If you ticked 'yes'*

As you accept that everything is your own projection, now look at your so-called 'mind', the 'projector'.

Does your mind have a tangible colour or shape?

Yes ☐ No ☐

9. *If you ticked 'no'*

Who is it that knows there is no colour and shape? A cognition, an awareness of nothingness.

Can you now see that mind is not a void?

Yes ☐ No ☐

A Tibetan baby boy slides out of his mother's womb into a room filled with Vajrayana thangkas and his family boasts seven generations of tantric practitioners. This Tibetan baby does not have one more ounce of what it takes to qualify as a tantric practitioner than the daughter of an eighth generation Russian orthodox Christian, whose eyes are as blue as turquoise, hair is as red as coral, and skin is as white as pearls.

If you answered 'no' to any of the above questions (apart from number 8) or are unable to answer any or all of them, but still believe you are entitled to become a Vajrayana practitioner, I have to say, you are batting on a very sticky wicket. Please think again. To give you Vajrayana teachings would be like giving a three-year-old child voting rights in her parents' divorce negotiations. (Incidentally, the reasons for her parents not fighting in front of their daughter should far outweigh those for including her in this kind of family discussion.)

All that being said, I hope you have understood that the point of this questionnaire is not that all Dharma centres should now give it to prospective Vajrayana students to fill out. It is just an example of how Vajrayana practitioners should think.

Analyse! Analyse!

Analyse everything. And again, I mean *everything*, including your personal interpretations of good and bad, beginning, middle and end, morality, secular and religious ethics, right and wrong, and of course, how you feel about the guru. Analyse until the value and even the notion of analysis reaches the outer limits of its prejudice.

The founder of the Buddhadharma, Buddha Shakyamuni, always stressed the importance of continuously analysing absolutely everything and gave us all the teachings we need to do it thoroughly and effectively. Buddhists continue to invest a great deal of time and energy in studying these teachings. Pramana¹⁵ (Buddhist logic) and of course Madhyamika, provide us with the tools we need to deconstruct all possible views.

In a way, a big chunk of Buddhist philosophy is devoted to how not to accept anything at face value. Instead, we learn how to construct a sophisticated doubt, then we learn how to doubt the doubt itself by deconstructing our stubborn reasons for harbouring doubts in the first place. Once we have taken our doubt to pieces and convinced ourselves that everything appears out of nothingness, we may finally experience the dawn of what Buddhists call ‘devotion’.

‘Doubt’ and ‘belief’ are two sides of the same coin. Both are crucial ingredients of the spiritual path. Just as it’s not possible to make a cup of coffee without hot water and coffee beans (preferably freshly ground), the constant interaction between belief and doubt is vital on the spiritual path. Belief crushes doubt and doubt crushes belief. You cannot first eliminate all your doubts, then fully believe every word of the teachings – no doubt, therefore belief. As our doubts become sharper, more profound and more sophisticated, so do our beliefs, which makes the interaction between doubt and belief tremendously beneficial.

A classic Vajrayana example likens the spiritual path to sharpening a knife. Sharpening the knife wears out both the whetstone and

the metal of the blade, and it is this ‘wearing out’ that produces the phenomenon of a sharp knife. General Buddhist teachings talk about the challenges, problems and solutions we encounter on our spiritual path, whereas the Vajrayana – Tantrayana – teaches that we must wear out both the problems and the solutions. And by the way, if you try to keep just one of those solutions as a souvenir, it will almost immediately become a problem.

Do you congratulate yourself on having good analytical skills, an open mind, a progressive outlook and a healthy respect for scientific method? If you do, you are probably not aware of your most deeply rooted, closed-minded, habitual thought patterns, which, once revealed, demonstrate that, far from being the most liberal-minded person on the planet, you are actually the most conservative.

Based on credible historical and scientific evidence, few historians are likely to accept that the story we call the Mahabharata actually happened. The problem is that, when we talk about evidence, we are dealing with the product of a human mind. Mind is what forms an opinion. All forms of debate and analysis require a mind – two stones would be incapable of discussing the credibility of available evidence. Yet, trusting the conclusions drawn by an opinionated mind is the root of blind faith. If you are unwilling to analyse and deconstruct your own analytical system, the Vajrayana is not for you.

If you have a strong belief in time, not as a relative truth but as an ultimate reality with a beginning and an end – Genesis and Armageddon – not only is the Vajrayana not for you, neither is the Shrivakayana. A belief in ultimate beginnings and endings also translates as a belief in an ultimate cause. None of the Buddhist vehicles believe in an ultimate cause. The Theravadin tradition, for example, believes in an ultimate ‘now’.

Time is make-believe, albeit an extremely powerful and convincing piece of make-believe. So if you think Buddha was an ordinary man who was born in Lumbini, renounced family life,

relocated to Magadha and began to teach, and that's all there is to it, then the Vajrayana is not for you.

If you cannot accept that 'bindu' (which is something like DNA) is the Buddha, then the Vajrayana is not for you.

If you have difficulty believing that the mundane cognisance you experience right now, as you read this sentence, is the Buddha, then the Vajrayana is not for you.

If you cannot appreciate that the fruit of your journey is none other than the state you are experiencing at this very moment, the Vajrayana is not for you.

In other words, if you think that buddhahood can only be achieved after you have gone through countless procedures over several aeons, the Vajrayana is not for you.

If you mock myths and legends, slot them neatly into the same category as fairy tales (like Little Red Riding Hood) and believe that all fairy tales have now been superseded by historical fact, the Vajrayana is not for you.

Asians, especially Indians, are quite comfortable about wrapping history in myth and legend. But how do we talk to people for whom both the past and the future are extremely important, but who place so little value on the present? How do we talk to people so steeped in past history and inspired by visions of the future that they virtually overlook the present? How do people from cultures for whom history is not a big deal talk to those whose cultures are so 'history-centric'? Cultures shaped by the Abrahamic religions – for example, the two biggest religions in the world, Christianity and Islam, and their father religion Judaism – constantly look back at their shared history. How do people for whom everything is happening right now, in this moment, talk to those who are constantly looking back? At best, communication is limited, like a conversation between a dog and a cat. How do we tell people from a culture that takes a dim view of sex, believing the very act to be immoral, taboo, dirty and shameful, that sex can also be a path?

If you believe the path should present clear definitions, neatly classify problems and solutions, and divide the world into protagonists and antagonists – like Hollywood’s baddies and goodies – then the Vajrayana is not for you. Why? Because the Vajrayana refuses to see a gap between the solution and the problem. Just as homeopaths are proud of using the poison that causes an illness to cure it, the Vajrayana is proud of using the problem as the solution.

The Vajrayana has never been a mainstream system and it never should become one. It is therefore unlikely that it will ever be accepted by mainstream thinkers. Having been kept secret for centuries, its teachings and practice have necessarily been limited to a select few. And its very exclusivity may well be why its methods are so easy to crucify in the court of public opinion.

From a Vajrayana point of view, it is worrying that so many of the Tibetan lamas who publicly practise the Vajrayana are now so popular. Are some aspects of the Vajrayana being shoehorned into mainstream society?

If you cannot accept that your imperfections are illusory, temporary and removable, you will be unable to accept that your true nature is a deity, the embodiment of compassion and wisdom. If this is the case, the Vajrayana is not for you.

If you are afraid of controversy and kowtow to social expectations, or if you are determined to be radical, annoying and to disrupt social harmony, the Vajrayana is not for you.

You may find it relatively easy to renounce your second car and to live cheaply, but if you cannot see that everything in the material, samsaric world is fundamentally flawed and unsatisfying, and that everything we possess, value and cherish is fatally flawed, meaningless and deceptive – including ideologies such as democracy and freedom of speech – not only is the Vajrayana not for you, neither is the Shrivakayana.

Your heart may break when you see a photo of a starving child in South Sudan or Yemen, but if you have no compassion for

Donald Trump, not only is the Vajrayana not for you, neither is the Mahayana's path of the bodhisattva.

If you regard the Shravakayana and the Mahayana and all the world's other authentic religious spiritual systems with contempt, the Vajrayana is not for you.

The Vajrayana is not a dogma; I doubt it's possible for a spiritual path to be less dogmatic than Buddhism, especially the Vajrayana. However, the vast majority of human beings in this world respect and rely on reason and logic, which makes the Vajrayana too avant-garde for most.

According to one version of a Hindu fable, Shiva's consort, Parvati, was the first being to ask him to teach tantra. Although initially he refused, she persisted until he eventually agreed, but on one condition. "I will teach you tantra," said Shiva, "but when I do, we must be in union, because it is only possible to truly hear the tantric teachings when you are deeply in love."

To a moralistic mind this might sound a bit twisted, if not sick. But doesn't falling in love make everyone look at the world from a very different angle? Being in love changes how we think. Even the finely-honed logic and rationale of the most sceptical, rigorously empirical research scientist falls apart the moment she falls in love. As Vajrayana practitioners, we long to transcend both the rational and the irrational by thinking outside both these boxes.

By now, the aspiring tantrikas among you may be feeling a little depressed. Take comfort in the fact that the supreme Vajradhara himself said that if, even for a nano-second, those who live by reason, logic and proof are attracted to the magical and profound Vajrayana path, they must have a connection with it. If you are willing to invest in that connection, you have all the qualifications you need to set out on the Vajrayana path.

THIRTEEN

The Vajrayana Is for You

WE ALL START out in life with the belief that everything we value, treasure, root for and hold dear will bring us some kind of satisfaction, however fleeting. And as time goes by, we start to realise that every corner of samsara is meaningless and futile. So, why bother? What is the point of constructing a samsaric house of cards?

Have you ever felt that your time on this earth is limited? That feeling is sometimes so strong that it's as if you had been told you have six months to live. Time is short, your own time on this earth is running out, and anyway, worldly life is futile. Even so, you continue to do what you have always done: you continue ploughing through that 1,000-page novel, visit the beach, go to the theatre and attend all the birthday parties you are invited to. The only difference now is that you know for sure that you have nothing to lose and nothing to fight for.

Outwardly, you are a flawed and impure human being, but deep inside, the real you – the 'you' that you long to reveal – is like the purest gold. If you had three countless aeons to separate the gold from its rocky ore, you might choose to follow a path that is systematic, sedate and safe. But as time is short, you are impatient to dig out the real you as quickly as possible. You do some research and discover a few safe-looking paths that come with built-in safety belts, gates, railings and the promise that this path will give you a smooth and comfortable ride. The drawback, from your point of view, is that they are all too slow. So you ask yourself, "As I have nothing to protect or keep safe, what's the point of taking things slowly?" Impatient to start truly benefiting countless sentient beings, you are keen to dismantle your delusions in record time. And then,

you discover the Vajrayana. For about a year, you listen to umpteen teachings and contemplate their meaning. You find some aspects of the path a bit overwhelming and unsettling, but even so, you are soon convinced that the Vajrayana has all the answers you seek.

If this is how you feel, and if you don't mind having the feathers of your sensitivities ruffled from time to time, the Vajrayana is for you.

Is the Vajrayana Still Relevant Today?

Think about so-called unwholesome thoughts. Don't bother about context, religious or otherwise, just think about unwholesome, unscrupulous, dishonourable, dishonest, disreputable, fraudulent, corrupt, depraved, underhand, debauched, perverted, lewd, promiscuous thoughts. Two hundred years ago, a hundred, even fifty years ago, unwholesome thoughts were defined quite differently to how they are defined today. Over the years, how we think has changed, so our conception of crime, corruption, abuse, depravity and so on, has been transformed, and along with it, our conception of 'unwholesomeness'.

Two hundred years ago, thieves stole tangible objects that could be picked up and stuffed into their swag sacks – jewellery, wallets, silver candlesticks, gold snuff boxes and so on. Today's thieves steal ideas, computer code and all manner of intellectual property. Today's pirates steal music, films, books and computer games without setting foot outside their homes.

The modern world is more dynamic than ever before. Everyone is bolder, sharper and quicker, and our collective eye is perpetually glued to the horizon of progress and profit. Although our judgements about the makers and users of pornography have probably not changed much over the centuries, the pornography itself is very different. Two hundred years ago, drawings that were merely titillating were

expensive and hard to come by, whereas today, seriously hard porn is freely available to anyone who has internet access. And there is so much of it. The more pornography there is, the easier it is to stimulate the emotions that turn us on. 1950's 'sexy' is worlds apart from 2021's 'sexy'. Skimpy, provocative clothing is far skimpier today than it was back then. It's as if dualism has become more extreme and 'dualistic' than ever before. The sheer speed at which we now live puts an enormous strain on most of the world's spiritual vehicles and methods. Except, that is, for the Vajrayana, which thrives in environments created by extreme restructuring.

Ordinary life is riddled with rules and regulations, making it far from easy for bhikshus to uphold their vows and live like monks. Begging alms is becoming less and less feasible because it's now virtually impossible for a monk to avoid touching gold, silver, credit cards and all forms of money. At a pinch, it's possible to be a wanderer in India, but if you tried to wander throughout the US without carrying any ID you would be arrested on vagrancy charges. It is harder and harder for monks to be monks, but Vajrayana practitioners don't face the same difficulties. It's perfectly possible to follow the Vajrayana path and at the same time hold down a job, care for your ageing parents and do everything that all householders or laypeople do.

Buddha himself said that, as life on earth becomes more volatile and degenerate, human beings will have more doubts, and the emotions we experience will become more extreme. The mere thought of 'three countless aeons' might crush a potential Dharma practitioner's enthusiasm, and the prospect of willingly feeding their own body to a family of hungry tigers could demoralize and depress them. At such a time, said Buddha, the Vajrayana will not only prevail, it will flourish.

In the context of the Vajrayana, just because its countless methods are quick doesn't mean they are dangerous. Something as simple as sipping coffee can accumulate the same merit that takes

aeons to accrue on most other paths. One properly recited mantra can purify the same amount of defilements that other methods take lifetimes to root out. But to practise the Vajrayana properly, we must be ready and willing to let go of old ideas and values and have the courage not to get stuck in the rational world. It's like the difference between drinking just enough wine to get pleasantly tipsy but in control, and throwing all caution to the wind and getting completely sloshed. By the time your wish to shrug samsara off has passed the point of no return, your Vajrayana practice will no longer involve self-flagellation or penance of any kind, it will just be blissful.

If you are too busy to follow the Vajrayana or don't dare attempt it, simply aspire to make a connection with the path. Make the wish that one day you will be able to practise the Vajrayana and then long for it to happen.

The Tantrayana tells us it is extremely unusual for a buddha to appear on this earth and even rarer for a buddha to teach the Vajrayana. We are unusually fortunate to be alive at a time when it is still possible to hear teachings like all compounded things are impermanent; however much you own, it will never satisfy you; and the self you cherish is an illusion, it's just a label. We are doubly fortunate to have heard the wisdom that samsara and nirvana are illusions, as was last night's nightmare and the relief you felt when you woke up. And triply fortunate to live at a time when there still exists a thread of teaching that tells us the emotions we feel right now – rage, jealousy and desire – are the raw material of wisdom. Such great good fortune is worthy of celebration.

Do you recognize the limitations of logic and reasoning? Do you accept that empiricism is subjective? Do you trust that what lies beyond reasoning and empiricism is more than the inspiration to write a poem, or the feeling of falling in love? Are you strongly attracted to the state in which nothing makes sense? Do you accept that a state that makes no sense cannot truly be attained by using drugs or alcohol? Have you temporarily experienced that drug-

induced state and found it is not enough? Do you long to go beyond, once and for all, never again to become entangled in definitions? If you do, then the Vajrayana is for you.

If you can appreciate each infinite, inexhaustible, magical paradox as it happens, moment-to-moment in all directions, and if you feel you could do with a little of that magic – in other words, if you have begun to value blessings – then the Vajrayana is for you.

If the meaning of words like ‘all’, ‘infinite’, ‘beginningless’, ‘endless’ and ‘measureless’ tantalize and enchant you, then the Vajrayana is for you.

When you discover that you can harvest just as much wisdom by lazing in a hammock on a sunny afternoon as sitting in a shrine room with your back straight, and get excited about giving it a go, then the Vajrayana is for you.

If you think the only way to meditate is to sit on a cushion with a straight back, and that walking, standing and lying will prevent you from practising, ask yourself: how much time do you have to devote to sitting practice? No one can sit for 24 hours a day – if nothing else, think of the negative impact it would have on your health. If you are thrilled and excited about the possibility of gathering wisdom as you shower, sunbathe or chop onions, and so on, then the Vajrayana is for you. It will suit your character.

Finally, if you long to enrich your mind with the Vajrayana’s vast wealth of skilful methods, then the Vajrayana is definitely for you.

FOURTEEN

The Guru

‘GURU’ IS A beautiful Sanskrit word that has several profound layers of meaning. As such, it is almost impossible to translate. Most languages contain unique, untranslatable words. The Norwegians, for example, call the euphoria we feel as we start to fall in love *forelsket*, which, I am told, has no English equivalent. *Komorebi* is Japanese for the quality of sunlight as it shines through the leaves of a tree. *Goya* is the Urdu word for the moment a great storyteller makes a fantasy so convincing that it seems more real than reality. And the Serbians describe the bliss and sense of oneness that the simplest of pleasures can make us feel as *merak*.

‘Guru’ is slightly different from these examples because not only is it untranslatable, it has now been contaminated with so many worldly associations that its true meaning is virtually lost. How often do advertisers exploit and misuse ‘guru’? At best, the word evokes the image of a dreadlocked, ash-covered Indian sadhu, or a high-ranking, brocade-clad Tibetan lama (who, even as a baby, sits on a high, magnificently decorated throne). At worst, it reminds us of all the cooking gurus, fitness gurus and phone hacking gurus that clog up cyberspace. Is all this misuse and exploitation a 21st century phenomenon, triggered perhaps by scandals about rogue Vajrayana gurus behaving badly? Far from it! The dishonouring, tainting and defiling of the word ‘guru’ has been going on for centuries.

As I mentioned in chapter ten, a spiritual guru in Tibet was often also the equivalent of the CEO of a monastery. In Tibet, the title of guru was not reserved solely for teachers. Men who held important political or social positions were often given the title of guru. Others were elevated to guru status because they were well-liked, shrewd,

influential and gifted manipulators of the materialistic world. They may also have successfully teamed up with rich and generous patrons and, as we have seen, power and money are a big help when it comes to the propagation and preservation of the Dharma.

Basically, the Tibetans had all sorts of reasons for calling a teacher ‘guru’, most of which had nothing to do with the Dharma and everything to do with the prominent role gurus played in Tibetan culture. As a result, the procedures most Tibetans followed to initiate a tantric relationship with a guru were far from ideal. Certainly, the Mahayana and Tantrayana’s advice about analysing a guru’s qualities and background before signing up was, by and large, ignored.

That being said, even the worst beginning to a guru-student relationship often works out for the best, and many such relationships have flourished. Even so, the original tantric texts always discourage this approach.

History tells us about the few tantric masters who managed to successfully combine their spiritual role with that of a prominent public figure. It paid off big time for King Indrabhuti. All his subjects simultaneously attained rainbow body. Whereas King Trisong Deutsen’s experience is less clear. No one knows how many disciples he taught – not even the king’s personal entourage would have been privy to that kind of information – but we do know that he was not universally adored by his Tibetan subjects. He may, therefore, have had just one tantric disciple – a courtesan or a maid or a road sweeper, perhaps? Whoever it was, to the king, that disciple would have been the most important person in his entire realm, and only the two of them would have known about their tantric relationship. Why? Because this was how the Vajrayana was taught in ancient India. Vajrayana teachers and students never identified themselves openly and what happened between them was kept secret.

These days, the opposite is true. Vajrayana teachers and their students go out of their way to advertise both themselves and their practices. They boast publicly about their gurus, their lineage and

their practice regime, and so we know exactly who they are and what they do. Contemporary lamas even produce their own specially designed pins emblazoned with a unique emblem for their followers to wear, and flags for them to hang outside their homes.

In ancient times, guru and student would carry out their Vajrayana obligations in the same way today's undercover agents carry out clandestine investigations. The lifestyle of both the guru and the student would blend in seamlessly with that of their neighbours, giving the impression that they lived ordinary, unremarkable lives. In Tibet, it was well known that some of the most dedicated Vinaya monks and nuns, many of whom appeared to despise tantric practices, were often the most dedicated of all the tantrikas. At the other end of the scale, many of those who claimed to be tantric practitioners, carefully cultivated a tantric 'look', talked obsessively about tantra and taught nothing else, were usually incapable of applying even the most basic Buddhist practices, like not harming others.

Theoretically, it is possible for a lama to be your king, your political leader, your boss, your spouse, your lover and your root guru all at the same time. But in practice, it is a precarious balancing act that few can pull off. More often than not, trying to fulfil so many roles hinders rather than helps – especially those of us who lack wisdom and are a bit gullible and naïve.

Other Buddhist paths rarely use the term 'guru'. Instead, they call their teachers 'master', 'preceptor', 'guide' or 'coach'. What, then, is a Vajrayana 'guru'? Essentially, a guru is someone who leads others. According to the Vajrayana, such a leader must, at the very least, embody the qualities of reliability and trustworthiness. In other words, a guru must never be deceptive. Ultimately, there are only two qualities that never deceive us: the truth of emptiness and the truth of clarity. Thus, emptiness and clarity are the true guru. But as it is the human, outer guru who leads you to your true guru (the inner guru), your human guru is equally important. Your outer guru has a human face and can talk with you, guide you, teach you

and coach you. Without an outer guru, there would be no bridge to your inner guru, which is why the outer guru is indispensable on the Vajrayana path. It's also why our incomparable Vajrayana gurus are so revered and exalted.

Monk or Yogi?

Why did Shakyamuni Buddha choose to appear on this earth as a bhikshu? Because we human beings prefer our holy men to look like monks. The simple appearance and lifestyle of a bhikshu sits more comfortably in our human minds than the profligate lifestyle of a wild, party-loving householder. We expect authentic spiritual renunciants to live solitary lives somewhere remote. We like to imagine them taking shelter in tiny bamboo huts, eating just one meal a day, and owning next to nothing – perhaps a pair of sandals and a worn-out umbrella. The idea of a monk living in a marble palace filled to the brim with trouble-making siblings and attention-seeking, neurotic in-laws doesn't tally with our version of what 'holy' or 'spiritual' should look like. So the model of a guru that works best is that of an uncomplicated and humble monk. But if the goal of self-liberation is not enough for you, and if your intention is not merely to gain admittance to a Buddhist club or be accepted by a Buddhist community that strictly observes the Buddhist code of conduct, you might try casting a critical eye over the other paths that are available. It would probably be well worth the effort.

Bear in mind that few monks are able to live up to the popular ideal of what a serene, celibate monk should be like. And anyway, that model has been almost entirely appropriated by the more politically motivated monks. These monks do a good job of appearing to be holy, simple and even self-deprecating, but in reality, having developed a taste for power, money and material possessions, they are utterly incapable of loosening their grip on any of it.

In Tibet, China and Japan, the accepted lifestyle and behaviour of a celibate renunciant has been watered down to such a degree that all it now means is ‘does not have sex’. Although the more complicated tantric gurus bring a richness and depth to the spiritual path and practice that simple renunciants lack, tantric gurus are almost always judged far more harshly than their monkish counterparts. Except when it comes to sex. Sex is rarely forgiven. The Chinese are far more likely to forgive a Rolls Royce-driving Chinese Chan master who has been successfully prosecuted for financial skulduggery, than a learned and compassionate Zen monk dogged by rumours that he was once caught in a compromising situation with a woman.

As a child, my tantric teachers gave me the same lecture over and over again. They told me that treasure is often found in what looks like a pile of garbage because it’s the safest place to hide your valuables. We should therefore never underestimate or denigrate tantric gurus, in spite of their many girlfriends, broods of undisciplined children, several generations of irritating relatives, and their congenital inability to make ends meet. Disorganized and chaotic they may be, but authentic tantric gurus are never double-dealing, sanctimonious hypocrites. Why shy away from a guru who hides nothing? The grubbiest, smelliest, stickiest exteriors often contain the most genuine, straightforward and honest people you will ever meet. My well-informed friends tell me that this truth was known to a number of genuine Kung Fu masters, who often preferred to rub shoulders with simple, straightforward labourers in cheap bars than to found and run elite martial arts training schools.

Your Guru, Your Choice

Always remember that your tantric master is *your* choice. However convenient it would be to choose a famous head of a monastery or your village or family’s guru as your tantric guru, you don’t have

to if you don't want to. Your tantric guru is *your* choice. As the Tibetans say, there may be one hundred lamas on this earth, but there is only one guru in my mind. I know countless tantric students who, in spite of having easy access to all the highest ranking and most popular lamas, instead choose ordinary practitioners to be their tantric masters. I met one such monk on one of my many visits to the 16th Karmapa at Rumtek monastery in northern India. The 16th Karmapa was an extraordinary master. Utterly unique. Yet one of his own monks chose to receive all the Karmapa's mahamudra teachings (the pith instructions that are the jewel in the crown of the Kagyupa teachings) from a run-of-the-mill senior Rumtek monk who, in guru terms, was a nobody.

Westerners seem to think that the Dalai Lama is the root tantric master of all Tibetans. This is not true – it's not even close to being true! Tibetans respect, love and adore the Dalai Lama as their temporal leader. Some feel great devotion for him as a guru and receive major tantric initiations from him. But many Tibetans choose a different lama to be their root guru – your 'root guru' is the guru you remember first thing in the morning, just before you eat, and last thing at night.

I have also met quite a few Dzongsar Monastery monks who were alive when Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö was abbot. They told me that, much as they liked and respected him in his role as head of the monastery, they felt no devotion for him as a tantric master and therefore received personal instructions from other gurus. I can hear some of you thinking, "What kind of idiot fails to seize the opportunity of taking Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö – one of the greatest masters of the 20th century – as their guru, when he's standing right in front of them?" The fact that so many students didn't take Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö as their tantric guru is living proof that the true spirit of the Vajrayana is alive and well, and that it continues to flourish in Tibetan society. This aspect of the tantric guru-student relationship has not changed since the birth of tantra in Ancient India.

Saraha is one of the Vajrayana's most celebrated teachers. He was a great scholar and rose to become Dean of Nalanda University, which, in its heyday, was as prestigious and well-known as the Sorbonne is today. At first, Saraha received teachings from one of Nalanda's own Mahayana masters, but they didn't satisfy him. So he started secretly visiting an unknown guru in a very dodgy part of town. Do you know what Saraha's guru did for a living? She was a prostitute and arrow-maker. Soon after meeting her, Saraha quit his sought-after academic position to follow her full-time. And he kept their relationship secret from absolutely everyone – which is exactly as it should be.

A number of the posts I read on social media during 2017 and 2018 suggested that a system for training contemporary Vajrayana masters should be developed and taught at dedicated training centres, if not to propagate the Vajrayana, to preserve its authenticity and ensure the safety of future Vajrayana students. The argument was that with such a system, today's Vajrayana students would be able to rely on a clearly defined set of checks and balances to keep them safe. Unfortunately, such a model simply would not work in the Vajrayana. Why not? Because all Vajrayana guru-student relationships are based on a karmic link, which is why Saraha ended up with an arrow-making prostitute as his tantric guru – and she was anything but a safe bet.

Had the Vajrayana been part of the secular world, it's very likely that the recent scandals would have resulted in just such a Vajrayana master training centre being set up. After all, Tibetan Buddhism isn't short of experience when it comes to setting up educational institutions. To this day, shedras provide monks with a thorough Dharma education, and drupdras (meditation centres) provide practitioners with opportunities for doing retreats. Shedra graduates are not usually expected to focus solely on scholarship and often attend drupdras before going on to become khenpos and teachers. But the primary purpose of a shedra education is not to produce teachers.

Why? Because it doesn't work. An excellent Ph.D. dissertation does not guarantee that the scholar who wrote it will be a good teacher. Similarly, graduating from a shedra does not guarantee that a monk will be a good scholar or a good practitioner.

What, I wonder, would those who advocate a Vajrayana master training centre put on the curriculum? One thing a Vajrayana guru's formal training must necessarily include is a module on how to point out the nature of mind – 'Introduction to the Nature of Mind: 101'. However, although trainee teachers can be shown the tricks of the trade and given the time they need to learn all the tantric texts by heart, and so on, no amount of formal education in an institutional setting will guarantee an ability to inspire disciples. A one-size-fits-all approach to training a guru does not work in the Vajrayana.

Shedra graduates are often expected to teach in the West and most know enough about Buddhism and the Vajrayana to be useful to westerners. But who can judge which graduate is truly qualified to become a Vajrayana guru, tsawé lama and root guru, and who isn't? If a guru does not inspire their students, those students will look elsewhere – just like Saraha.

Having said all that, I must point out yet again that excellent safety measures have already been built into the Vajrayana. Recognizing just how vital these safety measures are, the masters of the past consistently recommended, even insisted that they were implemented. From what I see in today's Vajrayana sanghas, most of these safety-measures are now overlooked. What are they? Good old 'hearing and contemplation'. What does that involve? Listening to, reading, examining, debating, arguing and contemplating the Buddha's teachings. How do we 'hear and contemplate' effectively? By thinking deeply about every single teaching we receive and taking the time to examine it from every possible angle.

Are High Lamas a Safe Bet?

I have met people who believe that if a lama holds a high rank, for example as head of a lineage, that in itself will guarantee the lama's good behaviour. From their point of view, choosing a high lama as their Vajrayana guru probably is the safest bet. Students who offer themselves, body, speech and mind, to an unknown guru who makes arrows and turns tricks for a living, or to some other 'persona non grata', will get short shrift from their Dharma friends when their guru behaves deplorably. "It serves you right! You should never have chosen a lama you know nothing about" and "Teachers with no discernible lineage are bound to be loose cannons."

Our sense of being connected with a teacher is not necessarily based on what or how that teacher teaches. Let's say that you bump into a guru quite by accident and, in her presence, immediately realise, with the deepest conviction, that worldly life really is entirely futile. If you have a karmic connection with a guru, no matter where you meet, that guru will ignite your devotion, arouse your compassion for sentient beings, destroy your self-clinging, and inspire your pure perception. After all, Milarepa didn't go in search of Marpa after reading a glossy pamphlet he picked up in a fashionable coffee shop. He first laid eyes on Marpa as he ploughed a field, not as Marpa sat on a throne surrounded by an adoring entourage. In that moment, Milarepa felt something he had never felt before. If the same thing happens to you and you are absolutely certain that this guru is your teacher, you should go for it. But be warned, no insurance policy in the world provides cover for such a bold, brave, yet notoriously precarious first step.

Few of today's practitioners are as decisive as Milarepa and even fewer share his sense of adventure. Gone are the days of jumping in at the deep end. It's understandable. We live in an age of safety measures, checks and balances, duty of care and individual rights, all of which are intended to protect us. We may be tempted to play

rough occasionally, but never at the expense of our personal safety. Like American football players, we always take the precaution of wearing plenty of padding to insulate ourselves from serious harm. We are nothing like the woman who dreams she buys a penthouse in New York and, aware that she is dreaming, doesn't hesitate to accept the banana she is offered in exchange for the penthouse. We, on the other hand, assess the value of everything we see and then cling to it, even in our dreams. This is how our tightly-regulated world operates. But eventually, all the rules and regulations will smother and snuff out the magic of the Vajrayana.

People today want to know what it feels like to stand on the summit of Mount Everest but they don't want to leave the comfort of their sofas. Few have experienced the sense of achievement and confidence that comes from striving to accomplish an exacting goal. It isn't easy to convey to those who expect everything they wish for to fall into their laps just how marvellous such an accomplishment feels. This is one of the challenges of the path.

So, if after all that has been said, you are still enthusiastic about practising the Vajrayana but feel nervous about stepping onto what sounds like an uncomfortably risky path, don't worry. The Mahayana and the Vajrayana have already come up with countless security measures to keep you safe.

The Tantric Guru

Tantra, even at its most basic level, is about continuity. Let's take the example of what looks like a dirty cup. The cup may be dirty, but as it is washed and when it is clean, the cup is always a cup; the process of washing it does not change a single atom. Similarly, before you are enlightened, while you practise the Dharma and after you attain enlightenment, not one drop of your true nature will have changed. Your pristinely perfect nature continues to be your true nature

throughout. This continuity is what defines tantra and elevates it above all the other spiritual paths.

Another way of putting it is that your buddha nature is indestructible – ‘buddha nature’¹⁶ is the Mahayana term for the quintessence of your mind. Yet buddha nature is neither something, nor is it nothing; it is a paradox – the paradox of emptiness and cognisance. Tantra calls this paradox ‘vajra nature’. And vajra nature exists in all sentient beings, from the smallest ant to a tenth bhumi bodhisattva.

One of the reasons a human body is said to provide such a rare and precious opportunity is that we have a far better chance of understanding tantra in this body than in an ant’s body. What do ants think about? Their next meal? Staying in line as they march with their army? Who knows? But the idea that its next meal or its obsession with staying in line is a removeable delusion would never enter an ant’s head. Therefore, ants don’t have the mental equipment required to establish vajra nature.

The person who helps you uncover your vajra nature is what we call a ‘tantric master’ or a ‘vajra master’. The path that helps you realise the continuity of tantra and leads you towards the revelation of your vajra nature is called a tantric or Vajrayana deity, a tantric or Vajrayana ritual, a tantric or Vajrayana mantra and so on.

In the context of tantra, what does ‘Vajrayana student’ or ‘tantric student’ mean? A tantric student has complete confidence in the continuity and indestructibility of their vajra nature. It’s the same confidence a professional dishwasher has as he looks at a huge pile of the stickiest, smelliest, mouldiest dishes imaginable and knows, with absolute certainty, that the whole pile is washable. The thought that the dirt might be impossible to remove never crosses his mind. No matter how disgusting the dirty dishes look, the dishwasher knows that their true nature is not mould. He may even get excited about the prospect of washing them and feel a sense of satisfaction once he has completed his task. But, of course, washing dishes is just another

story, and like all stories, it's fake, made-up. The dishwasher cannot change the fundamental nature of the dishes, but he can wipe away the dirt. He cannot add anything to any of the dishes and he cannot remove anything but dirt. Thus, *driwa mepa gangwa mepao*: "there is no decrease and no increase."¹⁷

In other words, a tantric master's job is to help disciples recognize that, no matter how stubborn and inexhaustible our defilements, they are temporary and removeable. Contrary to the popular belief that a guru retains full control over a student *ad infinitum*, the sole aim of both the tantric master and the tantric path is to reach the point at which both guru and student shrug off their dependence on each other (co-dependency), as well as their dependence on 'sadhana' and 'practitioner'. Gurus are not like the political dictators who constantly find new ways of extending their sphere of influence and lengthening the term of their tenure.

Tantrikas never pray to be a guru's disciple forever and ever. The point of practising tantra has nothing to do with being an eternal student. If that were the case, I could understand why Stephen Batchelor quit Guru Yoga. I would probably do the same. As it is, the prayer tantrikas actually make is:

In all my lives, may I never be separated from the perfect guru,
And having benefited fully from the splendour of the Dharma,
May I perfect the qualities of the five paths and ten bhūmis,
And swiftly attain the sublime level of the Vajra Master.

Another misapprehension is that tantric gurus don't have to practise the Shravakayana and Mahayana. But, as we have already seen, the opposite is true. Tantric gurus are expected to apply all the Shravakayana and Mahayana practices *and* practise the Vajrayana. The quintessence of the Shravakayana path is to do no harm, and the quintessence of the Mahayana is to help others out of compassion.

If a tantric guru abuses a sentient being spiritually, emotionally, physically, or sexually, or harms anyone in any way, he is not only breaking the Shravakayana and Mahayana vows, but also the Vajrayana vows. An authentic tantric or Vajrayana guru is supposed to love and care for each disciple as if they were her only child.

Gossip About Gurus Behaving Badly

In this day and age, even if a spiritual teacher lacks the understanding of the union of emptiness and appearance (wisdom), he should at least be mature enough to recognize how costly his own bad behaviour would be if it resulted in the incineration of his students' seeds of interest in the Dharma – seeds so young that they have hardly begun to sprout. Quite a number of my friends have been trying for years to coax their boyfriends, girlfriends, brothers and sisters to take an interest in the Dharma. But since the recent much-publicized scandals, not only are these boyfriends, girlfriends and so on, completely turned-off by the whole idea of the Dharma, they are now worried that their loved ones have been sucked into a dangerous cult.

In Tibet, if a guru misbehaved, the farthest the gossip could travel would be a 10-day horse-ride away and only a few hundred people would hear about it. Nowadays, a few lines in the New York Times about the tiniest of misdemeanours can instantly incinerate tens of thousands of peoples' seed of interest in Buddhадharma. In this context, however small the lama's misdemeanour, it can neither be described as a wisdom activity nor a skilful method. If reports about a Buddhist teacher's behaviour paint a picture of Buddhадharma so dark that no one wants to follow the Buddhist path, or leads people to believe that simply learning about Buddhism is risky and might put them in harm's way, that teacher's activity is neither a wisdom method nor a skilful method.

Crazy Wisdom

The term ‘crazy wisdom’ is Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s translation of the Tibetan term *yeshe cholwa*¹⁸. Although my own understanding of ‘crazy wisdom’ is limited, I think it is fair to say that the aim of crazy wisdom is to think outside the box. However, the suggestion that one kind of wisdom is crazy implies that there’s another kind that isn’t crazy at all. This is not the case. There is no such thing as either a crazy or a sane form of wisdom. Crazy is only ‘crazy’ from an ordinary, mundane point of view. Not one word of Buddhist wisdom – from ‘selflessness’ and ‘all phenomena are impermanent’, to the Vajrayana’s pure perception – is even slightly ordinary, nor does it fall into the category of ‘mundane thinking’.

A genuine ‘crazy wisdom’ guru would have the confidence to tell a student to jump from a ten-storey building. But there are very few enlightened crazy wisdom gurus in this world. Most of us have neither the bad karma to meet a seriously mentally unstable guru – a guru who is ‘crazy’ in the old-fashioned sense – nor the good karma to meet a mahasiddha. To put it another way, we may not have the kind of bad karma that leads us to choose a complete nutcase as our guru, but neither do we have the good karma to meet a mahasiddha who might ask us to jump from a ten-storey building.

Crazy wisdom is sometimes interpreted as never kow-towing to social expectations, but this does not mean that crazy wisdom can be used to disrupt the social order, stoke the fires of revolution or create chaos and confusion. Crazy wisdom should *never* be misused like that. Both guru and student must always remember that for a Vajrayana practitioner, the Mahayana is the heart or trunk of their practice and the Shrivakayana is the root. If Vajrayana practitioners are unable to help sentient beings, they should, at the very least, not harm them. Any form of disruption to social norms is always harmful to a significant portion of society, so it would be entirely wrong-headed to imagine that Vajrayana practitioners, especially

tantric masters, are exempt from following the noble eight-fold path.

Are practitioners of crazy wisdom above the law? Of course not! Laws made by human beings are just as fallacious, illusory and futile as all human endeavours and values. At the same time, futile human activity provides the basis for all Dharma practice. Life is the raw material that we Dharma practitioners are supposed to work with. We only have nightmares because we dream, and often the thought that it's possible to wake up from a dream only occurs to us because we have nightmares. To disregard national laws and social convention is to disregard a relative truth – the 'conventional' truth. Without conventional truth, how can we even begin to talk about the absolute truth? As I mentioned earlier, the paradox of the relative and absolute truth cannot be resolved. A tantric master who travelled from Earth to Mars to enlighten the Martians would still have to adopt and abide by Martian laws. It is lunacy for tantric masters to imagine they are above the law and can do whatever they like – especially as the calibre of the vast majority of today's tantric masters falls far short of the calibre of great mahasiddhas like Virupa.

One day, Virupa went to a village bar for a drink. As soon as he had finished one drink, he ordered another, then another, and another, all the while promising the barman that he would pay his bill at sunset. He drank and drank and drank until he had drunk the bar and the entire village dry. But still, the sun did not set, and Virupa did not pay one penny for his drinks. Why didn't the sun set that day? Because Virupa was such a powerful mahasiddha that he could hold the sun in the sky for as long as he liked.

If, like Virupa, a mahasiddha were truly free from the constraints of conventional expectations and capable of holding the sun motionless in the sky, there would be no need to speculate about whether or not they were above the law because, obviously, they would be above and beyond all dualistic concerns. Until that level of realisation has been attained, tantric practitioners and teachers must

abide by the conventional truth – especially Vajrayana teachers who are responsible for inspiring others.

Unless we can perform miracles, like Virupa, Guru Padma-sambhava or Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal, we are all bound by causes and conditions, and therefore subject to the laws of the land. Crazy wisdom does not give gurus free license to do whatever they like, nor does it say that if both guru and student are consenting adults, what happens between them is their business. The guru and student are free to choose the course of their relationship within the boundaries of their country's legal system. Even so, the practices of pure perception and obedience to the guru go far beyond all that.

By the time a tantric student is ready to apply crazy wisdom methods, the idea that he is being forced or coerced or abused in any way will not even enter his head. If it does, that student has not been properly prepared and is therefore not ready to hear and practise the Vajrayana teachings. To an unprepared student, the guru's request for a cup of tea could easily sound like pressure, coercion, even bullying. "Why is he bossing me about? Why is he being such a domineering bully?" A properly prepared student is thrilled and delighted to do anything his guru asks of him. If the guru asked the student to give him his house, the student would hand him the keys and consider himself the luckiest person alive.

Just because a student accepts, in principle, that his guru practises crazy wisdom, the guru does not automatically have that student's permission to do whatever he likes. In fact, merely to suggest that a guru has wants and desires, or that he has his own agenda indicates that whatever is going on has nothing to do with crazy wisdom. An authentic crazy wisdom master would have gone beyond all forms of duality.

These days, the term 'crazy wisdom' is often used in the context of lamas having sex with students, or wearing strange clothing and wigs, or behaving badly. But as I have just said, crazy wisdom is neither about offending social norms nor intentionally offending

others for the sake of it. Eating meat in a vegetarian commune with the intention of provoking or offending the community is not a crazy wisdom method; neither is drinking whiskey in a teetotal town. 'Being offensive' is a pretty feeble interpretation of the crazy wisdom methods, which are designed simply to go against your preferences. If you are a voracious meat-eater, your crazy wisdom guru might instruct you to become a vegan. If you swear a great deal, he might insist that you take an oath never to swear again. In a world obsessed with sex, an excellent example of 'crazy wisdom' would be for your guru to ask all his students to take a vow of celibacy, and to take the same vow himself. Another good example would be for your tantric master to instruct you to take the vows of a Burmese monk and to follow that tradition (the Shravakayana path) for twelve years. As a Burmese monk, you would have to live the life of an ascetic, do all the Shravakayana practices and forget all about smoking cigars and drinking wine. Yet, every moment of those twelve years would count as tantric practice simply because you were following your guru's crazy wisdom instruction.

Crazy wisdom smashes all our concepts, but it's now almost impossible to practise. Why? Because so many crazy wisdom methods make practitioners look mad. For example, there are dakini practices that instruct you to prostrate to the first female creature you meet after leaving your room. What if that female were a bitch? Or a cow? Or a peahen? In the current climate, if your next-door neighbour saw you prostrating to a dog, or a cow, or a bird you could easily find yourself locked up in a secure psychiatric unit.

Many Buddhists assume that meditation, chanting and praying will always be part of their lives. This has never been the case. Shakya Shri, for example, threw his mala at the famously holy Guru Rinpoche statue at Yarlung Shedra, vowing never to chant another mantra or prayer for the rest of his life. "All I have done this lifetime is chant mantras. From this day on, I am done with supplication, meditation and mantra recitation." His students, who witnessed the

whole thing, understood his vow to be the greatest of all his concept-smashing teachings. And a perfect example of crazy wisdom.

FIFTEEN

The Student

AS YOU ARE reading this book, I must assume that you are a human being, and that the conditions that influence all human beings also influence you. None of us like to be ignored or misunderstood and most of us dislike those who ignore or misunderstand us. Even so, such people still influence us. We like to be noticed and we enjoy the company of those who pay attention to what we have to say. When, to our surprise, someone we meet immediately takes a fancy to us, we are usually willing to like them back, but sometimes we mistrust people on sight, without knowing why. It happens all the time.

Some of you are reading this book because you are trying to decide whether or not to ask a teacher to become your Vajrayana guru. I assume this means that, before taking such a huge step, you are trying to prepare yourself by reading a book or two about the Dharma. And I hope it means that, at least intellectually, you are trying to get to grips with the concept of non-duality; that you are beginning to recognize that everything you see, hear and so on, is filtered through your own unique perceptions; and that you accept that nothing is more important than your mind. I will also assume that you have received a modern education and are therefore reason-oriented and proud of it.

More often than not, would-be Dharma students first see their guru at a public event – perhaps in a large hall that has been elaborately decorated with Tibetan wall hangings and filled with clouds of incense. The guru usually sits on a high throne draped in heavy, multicoloured brocades, surrounded by monks and laypeople, all gazing up at him or her adoringly. But this is not the only way people meet gurus. You could meet your guru almost anywhere. You

might bump into exactly the same teacher quite by accident in a 7-Eleven store or at a party or an exhibition. Either way, if you have a karmic connection with a guru, the moment you set eyes on her, you will have a strong feeling that you can't name. You might translate that feeling into the urge to talk to her to find out what she is really like, or you might instantly decide, with absolute certainty, that she is your tantric guru. Whatever happens, please remember that nowhere in any of the tantras does it say that you should grab hold of the first tantric teacher you bump into and demand to be given the highest teachings, including those that require you to shed all your habits and accustomed props.

If you are completely new to the Dharma, listen to the general teachings for at least a year before even thinking about exploring the Vajrayana. This doesn't mean just doing the kind of sitting meditation that aims at relaxing you, so that you can de-stress and overcome depression. Meditation as a relaxation technique is extremely effective and has its place. But if your goal is to become a Vajrayana practitioner, you need to prepare yourself by listening to the Dharma teachings that go way beyond all that.

How many times have we been told that it is crucial for a student to analyse a guru, and vice versa? And how many of us actually do it? Or even know how to do it? One of the reasons we are advised to put a great deal of effort into preparing ourselves for the Vajrayana path is so that we have enough time to learn how to analyse a guru.

What is Your Spiritual Goal?

First and foremost, be realistic about your goals. Do you really need a guru? If your main reason for learning how to meditate is to help you de-stress, why not download a mindfulness app? Ask yourself, "What do I want to achieve through spiritual practice?" To live a healthy, wholesome life? To love your neighbour, help humanity

and heal the environment? As a so-called secular Buddhist, Stephen Batchelor writes, “Rather than attaining a final nirvana, I see the aim of Buddhist practice to be the moment-to-moment flourishing of human life within the ethical framework of the eightfold path here on earth.”¹⁹ Does that resonate with you? If your goal is to live a wholesome life, then please consider the meditation app option; it may be just what you are looking for. You might also add regular exercise, a healthy diet, and a little gardening to your regime.

Do You Long to Go Beyond?

Have you ever experimented with LSD? If you have, what made you do it? Was it because you wanted to forget about time, space, social values, past and future? Or was it just a way of getting your kicks at the weekend? If you are not a thrill-seeker, you may have been attracted to LSD because you like the idea of going beyond time, space, social expectations, moral strictures and ethical prisons. The chemical method for ‘going beyond’ only lasts a matter of hours and not only is it expensive, it’s also dangerous and illegal. Wouldn’t you rather ‘go beyond’ once and for all, never to return to so-called normality or to the shackles of ordinary perceptions, concepts and distinctions? Would you like to inspire others without sticking out like a sore thumb? Do you long to help people break free from their conceptual chains, while at the same time blending in with your community and communicating effectively with your kids, your uptight, moralistic conservative neighbours, free-thinking, limousine-driving liberal colleagues, and the ageing champagne socialists who dominate your local council? If you do, the Buddhadharma in general and the Vajrayana in particular, may be just what you are looking for.

Your Personal Guru, Your Personal Trainer

Think hard about what you want to do. How deep do you want to go? How far along the spiritual path do you aspire to travel? How high a spiritual mountain do you wish to conquer?

If you decide to stick to hiking over foothills and scrambling up the less challenging mountains, the guide you hire can be small, sweet and safe. But if your burning ambition is to conquer Mount Everest, your guide must have rather different skills and qualities. So think carefully before you choose your guide. Are you just spiritually curious? Are you looking for an unusual and amusing companion? What do you really want? Do you want to dance at children's birthday parties or be a Prima Ballerina? Do you want to sing in pubs or at La Scala, Milan? Do you want to ride a donkey or drive a Ferrari? Are you curious about tantra, but unwilling to change your way of life? If any of these options are true for you, why not choose one of the less demanding paths, like Ngöndro, that serves up its Vajrayana practices flavoured with lashings of Mahayana sauces and Shravakayana condiments?

If you have already met and feel irresistibly drawn to an impossibly pedantic guru, no matter how tickled you are by his sense of humour and outrageous personality, you must still do a thorough background check. Do you get the sense that he truly cares about you? Does he perceive you purely?

All the advice in this book is based on the assumption that the Vajrayana guru you are examining is not a mahasiddha but a samsaric being. But don't forget that, even though your guru is a samsaric being, once you become her student, it's your job to see her as a buddha. A good guru will know herself that she has not transcended karma and its consequences. She will also know that everything her students sacrifice on her behalf counts as karmic debt, including the effort they make to stand up when she walks into a room. And she will be well aware that her primary responsibility as a tantric guru

is to lead her students towards their innate buddha nature and then directly point it out.

The Guru Must Be Adorned with Skilful Means and Wisdom

After hearing scandalous stories about tantric gurus, new Vajrayana students often worry about how they should go about finding a safe guru. What qualities differentiate an authentic guru from a fraud? As if such teachings didn't already exist! The Mahayana and especially the Vajrayana tantras are packed with information about the qualities an authentic tantric guru should embody and these are the teachings new students should pay closest attention to.

The easiest qualities to look out for are that an authentic guru must be learned, disciplined and kind. She must have studied all the Buddhist teachings, especially shunyata, and be well-versed in the Buddhist/Vajrayana view and practice. It's fairly easy to gauge how learned a guru is by simply listening to her teachings. A slightly more important quality is that the guru must be disciplined, but it's more difficult to evaluate. Try observing the guru for a while and ask yourself, does she walk the talk? Does she put everything she teaches into practice? The third and most important quality is kindness, but it's also the hardest to assess. Is this guru kind?

Avoid Unrealistic Expectations

The tantric texts warn us that, as the years roll by, it will become increasingly difficult for students to find a perfect tantric guru. These days, some moralistic, ethically-obsessed Americans appear to expect all their public figures to be as pure as the driven snow. To apply the same expectations to a tantric guru is unrealistic. If you set

the bar of moral or ethical behaviour too high, the majority of the lamas you meet are bound to have done something that makes you cringe. Perhaps a guru stole sweets when he was six-years old, which to a student who values scrupulous honesty above all things, might be quite shocking. If you are serious about following the tantric path and come across a guru who embodies at least one or two of the many qualities mentioned in the tantric texts, I suggest you bite the bullet and take that guru as your tantric master. And as it's extremely rare these days for a guru to be approached by even one student with superior qualities, gurus must also make allowances for their students. So my advice to both guru and student is, give each other a generous margin of error.

A tantric student's practice must always include seeing their guru as the omniscient, omnipotent embodiment of all the buddhas. As I have said before, you will only truly see your guru as a buddha once you have attained the first bhumi. So don't be too hard on yourself if you don't manage to perceive him as a buddha the moment you receive your first Vajrayana teaching. Getting the hang of pure perception takes years, even decades, which is why a guru must never expect his students to see him as a buddha from the word go. A guru who expects instant perfection is unlikely to be a qualified teacher. I would add that, in this day and age, it is extremely unwise for a guru to beat students with a backscratcher, and downright stupid to emulate Tilopa by telling a student to jump from the top of a high building or cliff. Students must also be wary of their own unrealistic expectations of their gurus. If you ask your guru for that week's winning lottery numbers and they don't come up, you should not think any less of him.

Wisdom and Skilful Means

Wisdom and skilful means can only be used to perfection if appearance and emptiness and the relative truth and absolute truth are united. Practically speaking, this means that an authentic guru will continue to spin the line about the importance of students sitting with a straight back when they meditate, even though she knows full well that there is no such thing as 'self'. Why? Because storytelling helps. A good psychiatrist may say to a woman who imagines she has horns growing out of her head, "There's nothing to worry about! Just cut a couple of holes in your hat to make room for the horns." The psychiatrist knows that the horns don't exist (wisdom), and this knowledge gives him the confidence to suggest his hole-cutting solution (skilful method). The same goes for the guru's story about meditating with a straight back. The guru knows that the student's sense of 'self' is an illusion and doesn't exist (wisdom), and this wisdom gives him the confidence to tell the student to make sure her back is straight when she meditates (skilful method).

The whole point of the psychiatrist playing along with his patient's delusion is for him to find a way of waking her up from that delusion for good. The same goes for the guru. We can only work with delusion by using both wisdom and skilful means which are so tangled up that they are impossible to unravel. The more skilful you are, the wiser you become; the wiser you are, the more skilful you become; the greater your wisdom, the more skilful your methods. Delusion is a paradox. Delusions don't exist but they do make you suffer, which is another way of saying 'it exists (suffering), and it doesn't exist (delusion)'. So, the only way to work with delusion is by using wisdom and skilful methods; wisdom gives us the confidence to apply skilful methods.

The better our understanding of how to live in the world of paradox, the greater our ability to be skilful and wise. If you know how to live with paradox, you will be able to use skilful methods

and wisdom. The skilful method of hitting a student with a back scratcher might be just what that particular student needs to realise the awakened state – enlightenment; whereas the skilful method of praising a student’s achievements might delay their spiritual progress for aeons.

Even a guru’s appearance and lifestyle should embody wisdom and skilful methods. A householder who works full time to pay the bills while upholding the Dharma for themselves and others might find his lifestyle incredibly inspiring. Whereas a selfish, self-righteous and narrow-minded renunciant who lives in a solitary hermitage and leads a brutally austere life, might find her lifestyle painfully disheartening.

What Qualifies as a Skilful Method?

The paths and techniques that help develop wisdom are called ‘skilful means’ or ‘skilful methods’. These paths have been ‘dipped into’ or ‘sweetened’ or ‘dressed’ by the wisdom that is the prajnaparamita – in other words generosity, discipline, patience and so on. One skilful method that never backfires is that of offering flowers to a holy shrine. Strictly speaking, making an offering motivated by the wish for a good harvest, or to get a good job, or for any other selfish or material purpose is not a ‘skilful method’. Nevertheless, many masters tell us that when an offering is made to the Buddha, his blessings will eventually lead the offerer to a Dharma path – to the truth. An offering also counts as a skilful method if a new Buddhist practitioner who knows nothing about emptiness, dedicates the merit of their offering towards increasing their own understanding of shunyata. A more experienced practitioner thinks, “The flower I offer is just my projection. The act of giving is also my projection, and so is the object of my offering – the shrine.” This thought injects a large dose of wisdom into the offering, making it a very high-class

skilful method. This is how skilful methods work. And we use these skilful methods to enhance our understanding and realisation of wisdom – the wisdom of the Prajnaparamita.

The application of skilful methods requires a light touch, which is why the Mahayana sutras provide bodhisattvas (primarily teachers) with clear guidelines as to how they should be used. These guidelines include information about various methods of generosity, advice about when to offer words of comfort rather than scold, and recommendations about how to act in accord with the Buddha's teachings, and so on – the only proviso being that all the methods used must originally have been taught by the Buddha. Therefore as murder goes against the Buddha's teachings, you would be wrong to imagine that committing a murder yourself might be a skilful way of convincing a murderer to stop killing.

Unfortunately, some of the skilful methods gurus use – from the gentle, conciliatory, gift-giving approach to the rough, wrathful and censorious (so-called crazy-wisdom methods) – are sometimes the product of a guru's selfishness. How can you tell whether a guru is acting selfishly or not? Watch the guru when a student answers back, is rude or acts crazy. How does the guru react? Can he take it? Can he deal with the situation? An authentic guru would never give up on any of his or her students, no matter what.

Always bear in mind that the two most important skilful methods in a Vajrayana master's repertoire are: only teaching the Vajrayana to those who are ready for it; and keeping all aspects of the Vajrayana completely secret.

Find Out About the Guru's Lineage

As I have already said, never discount the possibility of the perfect teacher popping up out of nowhere, instantly cracking open the shell of your delusion and, without warning, laying bare your buddha

nature. But this is the exception not the rule. I cannot emphasize strongly enough just how important it is to assess and authenticate a teacher before taking him or her as your guru.

For deluded beings like you and me, one of the Vajrayana's most useful tools is 'lineage'. Please, take lineage seriously. I noticed recently that some of the younger generation of lamas give teachings that they themselves have not received. These young lamas are far from diligent, have never studied, and have yet to take full responsibility for caring for the Dharma. Nevertheless, they assert that they have no need to receive teachings in this life because they received them in a previous life. What utter bullshit! Never believe a lama who talks like that.

Always find out about a guru's lineage *before* you receive his teachings, to give yourself time to decide whether or not you want to be associated with his lineage gurus. How would you react if, in ten years' time, you discovered that one of the gurus in your lineage was a paedophile or a murderer or a con man? Would you be able to continue visualizing such a guru as a buddha? Few of us can see absolutely everyone as a deity. Could you see Donald Trump as a deity?

If a guru has a guru of his own, if he is obviously devoted to his guru and if he treasures his guru's teachings, their lineage is likely to be quite safe – especially if the guru's guru is still alive. So try to choose a guru who cherishes and has the greatest devotion for his own guru. This is one of the ways in which the guru lineage can help students – it's how lineage works.

As you now know, the real guru²⁰ is the nature of your mind. Although a girl looks at her reflection in a mirror to apply lipstick in an effort to enhance her beauty, her real beauty is her own face. The mirror helps her see her beautiful face by reflecting it back to her. The paradox here is that the reflection is the girl, but at the same time, it isn't. Looking at a reflection of herself makes it possible for the girl to apply her lipstick. If it didn't, there would be no cosmetics

industry. The outer guru is the reflection of your own mind. Some mirrors distort reflections, so it really helps if the mirror in which you see your mind reflected is a good one. In this case, the guru lineage is the mirror. A teacher who does not tell her students about her own guru cannot believe that she herself is beautiful. I know who I am when I look at my mirror and, because I can see the reflection of my face, I can also see my own beauty and apply lipstick to make myself even more beautiful. A guru who remains silent about his own guru does not instil confidence in others. His silence leaves students with the impression that he does not believe in his own beauty and that he lacks self-confidence.

I am not suggesting that students should ever flaunt their gurus or talk about them openly. But they should know about their guru's background, which means knowing about their guru's guru. Preferably, students should hear all this information from their guru's own lips. Students love to hear stories about the lineage masters, many of which are not only inspiring but also comforting and encouraging.

Lineage helps in so many ways. Students are inspired when they learn that the teachings they receive from the Karmapa were given to him by Tai Situ, who in turn received the same teachings from Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Taye, and that each member of the entire lineage of teachers received the teachings in the same way, all the way back to Naropa, Tilopa and the Vajradhara. Mahamudra students light the fire of passion for their chosen path by reading stories about the protégés of great mahamudra masters. They eagerly devour as many of the fables and biographies of their lineage masters as they can get their hands on. Learning about their own lineage fills many students with wonder and respect. They are encouraged to hear that, long before they met their own guru, great teachers like Milarepa, Tilopa and Naropa had put a great deal of effort into ensuring that all the existing Buddhist lineages would continue to flourish and spread for generations to come.

Lineage points out that the practices we do today are not minor shamanistic rituals that, once upon a time, one or two people practised in a small village deep in the jungle. And when one of the gurus in our lineage is accused of behaving badly or for some reason fails to win us over, we can count on the rest of our lineage gurus for help and inspiration.

A Word or Two of Advice

I have always had a great deal of admiration and respect for the Hindu tantras, particularly the Shiva tantras. In Varanasi one year, a friend pointed out a lone sadhu who was believed to be a great tantric adept. It was an opportunity I could not miss. I immediately summoned all my courage and asked the tantric sadhu if he would teach me the Shiva tantras. I realise now how disrespectful my request was; curiosity is not a good enough reason for asking for a spiritual teaching, especially as I had no intention of following this Hindu teaching to its ultimate conclusion. Yet, in spite of my less than perfect motivation, the sadhu surprised me by saying yes. I then did as I always do and asked when I should return for my first teaching.

“For the first three years you must be my servant,” was all he said. And without waiting for my response, he turned and left.

At first, I was amused. Then I felt depressed. And my depression lasted for several days. Why are my own tantras, the Buddhist tantras, no longer treasured in the way the Hindu tantras still are?

Although it is impossible to convey the entirety of the tantric path in words, a few of its main aspects can be explained. By developing an intellectual conviction in this incredible path, a tantric student will gather quite a number of the ingredients necessary for buddhahood. But an intellectual understanding is not enough. The tantric path must be experienced. And to experience the path, you must practise.

This is the tricky bit. A mountaineer can tell you what standing on the summit of Mount Everest felt like. Previous conquerors have published any number of podcasts, films and books about how they felt as they stood on the same spot. But you will never know what it actually feels like until you stand at the summit of Mount Everest yourself. And to do that, you must not only learn mountaineering but climb to the top of the mountain yourself.

Once again, I must repeat myself. The best advice I can give those of you who are considering stepping onto the Vajrayana path is to give yourself ample time to analyse your potential teacher *before* you take him, or her, as your guru. Analyse the guru, do a thorough background check and test his reactions to awkward situations, even if that means purposefully annoying or contradicting him privately and publicly. You should also ask yourself how serious you are about learning to think outside the samsaric box. How serious are you about learning how to think differently? Only those of you who have genuinely set your hearts on learning how to transform how you think should even consider setting foot on the tantric path.

It goes without saying that, once friends and acquaintances know you practise tantra, you are likely not only to be stigmatized but also be the butt of endless jokes. Some friends will judge you quite harshly, accusing you of blindly following a phoney guru. Others will blame you, personally, for perpetrating every spiritual scam and deception on the planet. A clear understanding of the Buddhist view will not only give you the courage to live with all these snarky comments, but the skilful methods to rise above them without getting defensive or making a fuss about exercising your right to choose, and so on.

If possible, keep your spiritual practice a closely guarded secret. Of course, absolute secrecy is the ideal, but for most of us, that horse has already bolted. A crystal-clear understanding of the view will provide you with an easily accessible safe haven. Just as arrows cannot penetrate the thick, stone walls of an impregnable fortress, no matter which direction they are shot from, the view will keep you safe.

Once you have established an unshakeable confidence in the view, you will begin to experience the benefits of that realisation. In other words, once you are convinced that all your stubborn, apparently inexhaustible defilements are removable, and confident that your *true* nature is the Buddha and that all dualistic samsaric values are no more real than a mirage or a movie, you won't be choosy about which method you practise. As long as the method matures your realisation and takes you closer to that view, you will do whatever it takes. Knowing that there is a huge lump of gold lying in the middle of a dark, filthy swamp, you won't hesitate to wade through leech infested mud to dig it out. You won't care about how dirty and sweaty you get or how little you sleep; from dusk until dawn you will work joyfully to claim your prize. Similarly, having found your perfect guru, whom you now consider to be the Buddha, no matter what he asks you to do, you will do it joyfully. Words like 'obedience' (you must obey whether you like it or not), 'pure perception' (self-deception) and 'devotion' (blind faith) will take on an entirely new meaning.

Most Vajrayana beginners feel some trepidation about what their vajra master might ask them to do. "What if I just can't manage it?" It's quite normal to feel that way. But there is no need to worry. Not one single tantric shastra or text says that you cannot talk to your guru about why you feel unable to do as he asks. If your guru tries to force you to do something against your will and, by doing so, risks incinerating the seed of your devotion, he is not qualified to be a Vajrayana master. A good Vajrayana master will challenge all your misconceptions and habits but never push you so hard that he reduces your devotion to ashes. If that happens, it means there is no karmic connection between you.

A qualified Vajrayana master would never expect a student to perceive everything 100% purely from day one – if that were possible, students would not need a spiritual master. So, if you see your master do something illegal, inappropriate or objectionable, or if you witness him behaving badly in any way at all, you should ask

him about it. There is nothing in the Vajrayana to say you shouldn't. In fact, I strongly encourage you to talk to your guru about anything that bothers you. If you can, try to approach him motivated by the wish to solve your problem – “I want to resolve this misperception because I long to see you as a buddha. What should I do?” By asking your guru directly about anything that bothers you, motivated by the wish to perceive him purely and to make progress on the path, you will be able to maintain your respect and devotion for him. Or her.

What if your guru does not grant private audiences, or you cannot find your way past the entourage, and so on? How can a student clear up misunderstandings if they are unable to speak privately with their guru? This very important question pinpoints a major flaw in how the Vajrayana is taught today. The fact that this question is asked so often is proof that authentic Vajrayana guru-student relationships are rarely forged.

Historically, tantric gurus accepted only a handful of students. These gurus were not jetsetters. They did not run monasteries or administer foundations. In fact, they only ever took a break from their practice to relieve their bowels and bladders. The notion that students might not be able to talk to their guru because he was on a conference call with two university professors and five translators or watching a movie would have been unthinkable. In stark contrast, some of today's tantric gurus are followed by tens of thousands of devotees. Do these gurus genuinely maintain a tantric guru-student relationship with each of their students? Again, it depends on their motivation and focus. Some gurus simply want to bless as many people as they can, and to create opportunities for all sentient beings to connect with the tantric path. But we are not examining that kind of tantric guru in this book. We are looking at the kind of guru we must rely on to crack open our samsaric shell and work directly with the nature of our mind. In other words, we are looking at the kind of guru who guides and coaches us step-by-step along our path.

The golden age of Tilopa and Naropa is well and truly over, which means it is extremely unlikely that you will be your tantric teacher's only tantric disciple. Your tantric teacher may have hundreds, if not thousands, of other students, each with their own affectations, moods, neuroses and peculiarities. As human beings, we all live with a high level of uncertainty – we have no choice. Most students long for their own private, tailor-made guru but have to vie with other students for their guru's attention. Even so, you continue to encourage your friends to follow your guru – which is why none of you will ever have your own private guru. Working with your tantric guru alongside a sangha of thousands may sound overwhelming, but it also provides you with fantastic opportunities for practising tantra.

Followers of Shakyamuni Buddha belong to an enormous extended family of spiritual practitioners; the connection between tantric practitioners is even closer. From the tantric point of view, since vajra nature – buddha nature – connects all sentient beings, we are supposed to think of each living beings on this planet as our relative, however distant. All the recent fuss about vajra masters seems to have completely overshadowed what it means to have vajra brothers and sisters. Everyone who receives the same abhisheka in the same mandala from the same guru is a vajra sibling and should be thought of as immediate family. Our closest and most intimate relationships are with those with whom we receive the very highest tantric initiations, such as the pointing out instructions.

Although tantric practitioners are supposed to perceive all sentient beings purely, most of us struggle to perceive our guru purely, let alone our vajra brothers and sisters. Although disagreements amongst sangha members and all the passive-aggressive bickering that goes on does count as breaking samaya, never forget that it is just as easy to mend a samaya as to break it. When you learn to draw, you are shown not only how to use a pencil but also an eraser, and mending broken samayas can be just as much fun as learning how to use an eraser, mix colours and refine shapes.

The Guru-Student Dynamic

THE JOB OF a High School physics teacher is to teach his students physics and to help them straighten out misunderstandings about the science of matter and motion. Students are expected to attend a certain number of physics lessons each week and to clarify anything they have not understood directly with their physics teacher. The minimum qualifications an aspiring physics teacher needs before applying for a job are a bachelor's degree, preferably in physics, and some kind of teaching qualification. Once a physics teacher has found a job, his task is to explain the theories and principles of physics, assign homework, answer questions and set exams. Physics teachers and their students focus exclusively on physics. Once students have graduated, if they ever see their physics teacher again, it will probably only be at school reunions.

Most of the above can also be applied to spiritual teachers, particularly Vajrayana gurus. But the Vajrayana guru-student relationship is far more involved. Unlike a physics teacher, stuffing a student's head full of information is a miniscule aspect of the Vajrayana guru's job. And the disparities don't end there.

A high school teacher gives students the information they lack, whereas a guru removes concepts and theories that are not needed.

A high school teacher answers students' questions, whereas a guru questions a student's answers.

A high school teacher shows students how to find their way out of a maze, whereas a guru is more likely to put the student in the middle of a maze and then destroy it.

A high school teacher expects obedience and discipline in the classroom, whereas a guru expects humility.

A high school teacher's job is to educate students, whereas the guru's job is to open the students' minds.

A high school teacher will help students mature and grow, whereas a tantric guru reveals a student's timeless innocence.

Motivation

Before student and teacher enter into a Vajrayana guru-student relationship, they must both be clear in their own minds about what they are doing and why. Initially the student's motivation might be the wish to attain enlightenment, but motivation is fragile, easy to dilute, and can easily metamorphose in unexpected ways.

Out of devotion, a student might volunteer to clean a lama's room and is praised for doing a perfect job. He must now be careful not to allow his success to hijack his motivation for having volunteered in the first place. His motivation for following the Dharma and his guru is to enlighten all sentient beings and his motivation for cleaning his guru's room should be exactly the same. The cleanliness of the room and how well he completes his task are of secondary importance to that of universal enlightenment. If you always do your best, motivated by the wish to awaken or enlighten all sentient beings, just washing a few dishes accumulates a great deal of merit. So you should constantly remind yourself to come back to your original motivation – enlightenment.

What if your motivation is pure, you have done your best and completed a task to perfection but, for some reason, your meticulous lama (he may have a lot of Virgo in his astrological chart) flies into a temper and scolds you vigorously for twenty minutes? If you have already dedicated your efforts, you will accept the scolding with equanimity and, at the same time, make an offering towards the well-being of all sentient beings. By doing so, you will accumulate even more merit.

Incidentally, I have noticed that when a student is seen to spend a great deal of time with a lama or becomes that lama's attendant, it is widely assumed that they were properly prepared and fully trained for the job. That is not the case. Actually, it couldn't be further from the truth.

Confidentiality

As I have mentioned time and again in this book, the relationship between a tantric guru and tantric student must always be kept absolutely secret; whatever happens between them is confidential and should stay under wraps. Strictly speaking, such a relationship revolves around the giving and receiving of tantric teachings, techniques and pith instructions, as well as the custom-made methods the guru creates specifically for the individual student. None of these teachings and methods should be published, talked about or shared in any way, shape or form.

In ancient India, tantric practitioners and gurus fiercely guarded their anonymity. A tantric guru and student may have worked side by side at the same biscuit factory, but none of their co-workers would have had an inkling about their tantric relationship. If they were undercover spies at an embassy, the guru might have been a janitor and the student the ambassador. To maintain secrecy, the ambassador would only prostrate to the janitor and sit at his feet to receive teachings in the boiler room at midnight. This is how a tantric guru-student relationship used to be conducted. Sadly, those days are long gone.

Today, keeping the tantric guru-student relationship secret is complicated by the other roles a guru is expected to fulfil – for instance, abbot of a monastery, or director of a non-profit organization. Ideally, the student should first analyse the guru, then consciously and with great humility, decide to request a specific

teaching or initiation. But too often, habitual patterns, local culture and human expectations overwhelm our best intentions, creating all kinds of confusion and anxiety. Keeping a secret is not that simple.

Imagine you are invited to the inauguration of your local post office. The moment you arrive, you are told a famous lama will give an initiation as part of the celebrations. This news creates something of a spiritual dilemma in your mind. Technically, it is your right to choose which initiations you receive and from whom – the Vajrayana states this quite clearly. In this case, the lama is also the abbot of the monastery that owns the house you live in and puts a great deal of work your way. Years ago, to avoid any worldly conflicts of interest, you resolved never to receive an initiation from him. So now you are in a quandary. If you get up and leave, everyone will see you go and you will risk offending the lama on whom your livelihood depends; if you stay, you will be expected to make promises that may be hard to keep. What do you do?

Friends who have found themselves in this position tell me that the best thing to do is offer the traditional white scarf and assume the usual posture of devotion. In other words, fake it. Make it look as though you are participating but block your ears and try to concentrate on something else. It's a difficult situation and I felt for my friends. But at least they were fully aware that receiving an initiation would have spiritual consequences.

In the case of this particular post office opening, the reason for giving the initiation is not the wish to attain enlightenment but to promote a new business. Everyone in that part of town is invited, including the local residents and businessmen and women. Some attendees are not Buddhist and may privately think of Buddhism as a heathen, devil-worshipping cult. During the initiation, everyone receives blessings and gets their heads banged with a large vase. But few have the faintest idea about what is going on and therefore do not receive the initiation and have no samayas to keep. If you have

ever found yourself in this kind of situation, don't worry. You can't break a samaya if you never promised to keep it in the first place.

Student-Guru

The relationship between a tantric guru and student begins the moment the student receives an abhisheka. What does this mean?

As we have just seen, it is not uncommon for big ceremonies to be attended by crowds of people oblivious to what is going on – this is yet another cultural phenomenon that grew out of Tibetan customs and habits. Attendees may be aware that the ceremony is called an 'abhisheka' and may even be eager to receive it, yet they often know next to nothing about the guru giving it. His history and lineage are a mystery. Why do people attend big ceremonies? More often than not, it has nothing to do with the longing to break free of 'duality', or to recognize their innate buddha nature, or to wake out of an ordinary state of mind. I have often seen tourists wander into abhishekas to satisfy their curiosity or take an exotic selfie.

If your interest in an initiation is one degree more than superficial, you can receive an abhisheka as a blessing. Will you therefore enter into a formal Vajrayana guru-student relationship with the guru who gave the abhisheka? Strictly speaking, no. Will you forge a spiritual connection with that guru? Yes, of course. But as you have no intention of making a big investment in either the path or the guru, you will not instantly become a major shareholder in the Vajrayana, just a general sympathizer – at most, a member.

Let's say you have heard and contemplated numerous teachings, including Madhyamika, and that you have studied tantric philosophy. You meet a guru and decide to do a thorough background check of the guru and the guru's lineage. Your findings are positive, even inspiring, so you decide to take your general interest up a notch and

ask the guru to give you the highest yoga tantra initiation. Your decision is not made lightly or spontaneously, neither are you on some spiritual trip. You make your decision with a clear and sober mind, based on thorough research and good information. You then request the initiation and the guru agrees to bestow it.

During the initiation, both you and your guru must be as aware of what is going on as a bride and groom are during their marriage ceremony when they are asked, “Do you take this man (or woman) to be your husband (or wife)”, and they reply, “I do”. When couples get married, they are clear in their own minds that they are not playacting. They know they really are getting married. Similarly, when an initiation is given and received, both guru and student must know that they are binding themselves together at the highest level. It is not a game and there will be consequences. Initiation texts warn us, for example, that the amrita we drink at the beginning of the abhisheka will either become the nectar of immortality or molten lava with the power to destroy us.

Some initiations are nothing more than pointing out instructions – the highest abhisheka. Once the ritual is over, you and your guru are spiritually ‘married’. Traditionally, this is said to be the highest form of *vajra chela* and *vajra acharya* known as ‘*guru shishya parampara*’. You have now become a major shareholder in the tantric path. From this moment on, your guru is the most important person in your life. Your guru is everything – father, mother, teacher, doctor, friend, *everything* – and of far greater consequence to you than all the other deities and buddhas put together. Thousands of buddhas have already appeared in this world and thousands more will become apparent in the future, but the connection you have just made with your guru is unique. The remedies needed to treat all your ailments will be provided by your guru. Other buddhas may come and go, but the supreme influence and guide throughout this and your future lives will always be your guru.

How we see our guru depends on both the guru's and our own realisation. The teachings tell us that we must perceive our guru as a buddha. But, as I have mentioned time and again, no one can accomplish 100% pure perception from the word go. We all have to start somewhere. Beginners usually think of their guru as a generally nice guy who answers questions and gives advice. Gurus walk around, yawn and disappear to have a shit. They answer their phones and can be seen to participate in worldly activities. They are human beings doing everything that other human beings do. Students can therefore see and interact with their guru. They can watch their guru's every move. They can see him get overexcited about expensive offerings and react badly when a student dares to disagree or criticize. (In these examples the guru is not a realised being.) But no matter what you see your guru do or hear him say, your 'sadhana', your practice, is to think that your guru is a buddha. How? By recognizing that not only the guru but everyone and everything, including your judgements, are the product of your own projections. By doing so, you will significantly increase your ability to understand that the guru is a buddha and thereby progress quickly along the path.

Occasionally, a student's realisation will surpass that of their own teacher. Nevertheless, the student will remain humble; their level of realisation will itself ensure their humility. As the student's perception is no longer dualistic, it would not even occur to them to compare themselves with their guru. In fact, having gone beyond dualistic perception, the student's appreciation of the guru will snowball.

Guru-Student

The guru has an enormous part to play in the guru-student dynamic. When a student expresses the wish to step onto the Vajrayana path,

the guru must analyse that student even more stringently than the student analyses the guru. Remember, the guru we are discussing here is not omniscient. Therefore, when a student requests high teachings, the guru is compelled to ask questions like: “Have you studied *Madhyamika*? Have you studied Goenka’s *vipashyana*? If you aspire to follow Tibetan Buddhism, it’s important to be aware of its political history: have you read about the political history of Tibet? Were you educated in a Jewish or a Christian school? Were you brought up to respect Confucian values? Have you completed *Ngöndro*? If you have, what does ‘completed *Ngöndro*’ mean to you?”

The guru must also try to uncover the student’s true motivation and intention. Does this student want to receive a teaching as part of his research for a Ph.D.? Or is he equipping himself to become a self-appointed spiritual teacher? Perhaps the guru recognizes that a student’s reluctance to write books, or run a Dharma centre, or teach, demonstrates that he has the necessary patience, good judgement, practical know-how, and so on, to uphold the teachings. But how would he cope in the spotlight? Could he deal with all the jealousy and criticism that students of Tibetan lamas level at those who appear to be close to their guru? Or is he just after one specific teaching? Will he receive the teaching, then quickly disappear to accomplish the practice and have no wish for further interaction with the guru?

“Will the first man I saw today only visit me once in a blue moon? Probably. We won’t see each other much so there won’t be many opportunities for either of us to get upset or offended. Maybe it is OK to give him the initiation he has asked for.”

“The second man really wants to do this practice. In these degenerate times, meeting even one person who longs to practise the Dharma is worthy of celebration. I think I should give him the initiation.”

“This woman is very serious about practising the Dharma and keen to learn how to think outside the box. She is very enthusiastic

about dismantling the house of cards that is samsara – not a project to be taken lightly. Should I let her in?”

The guru must analyse all potential students in this way. And of course, we are still talking about a guru who is not realised.

The new students on whom the guru consciously and with a sober mind bestows abhisheka become part of the Vajrayana family and therefore retain a substantial stake in the tantric path. The guru must be fully aware of the shift in their relationship and of the responsibilities he has consciously taken on. Each of his students should be treated not only as his only child, but as his chronically sick and bedridden only child. ‘Sick’ in this context means under the spell of karma, emotions and aggregates, not that they are physically ill.

If someone is obviously drunk, it would be unfair to ask them to drive you home. Similarly, the guru must always be aware that his students are constantly under the influence of their emotions.

If a friend owes millions, it would be unfair to ask them to lend you money. Similarly, the guru must always bear in mind that all his students are heavily encumbered by karmic debt.

Ordinary people cannot perform miracles, so it would be unfair to ask them to perform the miracle of putting Mount Fuji into a suitcase. Similarly, the guru must recognize that his students are restricted by the five aggregates, so it would be unfair to expect them to see their guru as 100% buddha. All any of us can do is work with what we have got: our eyes, nose, education, habits and references.

Imagine a new-born baby is exposed to a corona virus and too young to be taught how to avoid touching her face and mouth, or to wash her hands. It’s no use trying to explain what corona virus is because she is pre-verbal. If she were your baby, how would you feel? This is exactly how the guru should feel about all his students.

Hello to any gurus reading this book. Please reread the sentence on page 183 about how some students might relate to you – yes you! – as ‘a generally nice guy’. My point is that this kind of student is

nowhere near ready to be given instructions like, “jump off a cliff” or “take your knickers off!” I am sure you mean well and may even have had a good Dharma education. Your gurus may not have been charlatans and I am sure you are kind and devoted to the Vajrayana – although you have probably not developed perfect bodhichitta quite yet. But how realised are you? If you tell a very new Vajrayana student with minimal capacity for understanding the tantric path to pinch a stranger’s bottom or undress and the student refuses, *you* are at fault. The student’s refusal is completely justified. After all, a good and loving parent would never allow a beloved child to use a sharp-bladed mincer.

Although a guru may not be omniscient, if she is a thoughtful, considerate, kind and astute guide, she might tell a newly initiated student that he must now do whatever she, as his guru, commands. This technique is designed to help the student summon his courage and reinforce his determination to follow the tantric path. A guru must never set a student up for failure or make impossible demands that result in the student breaking their bond with the guru. In other words, a kind, skilful guru should never put an immature, ill-equipped student in the position of having to say no. Gurus who fail to recognize their students’ limitations lack one absolutely vital ‘guru’ quality. What is that quality? Common sense.

Infinite Methods

As I have said throughout this book, many valid spiritual methods have become tainted by cultural habits. Usually, the tainted method looks similar to something that exists in the culture that is importing it. Traditional offerings, like lotuses, flowers, incense and candles, are common to most spiritual traditions and cultures. Prostrating or bowing to the Buddha is another good example. These days, westerners are taught to prostrate based on an Indian method that

the Tibetans adopted. The quintessence of the act itself is to venerate the Buddha. Prostrations are an exercise in humility because they go against our pride, and they are perfected when accompanied by wisdom. Theoretically, instead of prostrating Indian-style, you could adopt one of your own culture's gestures instead – like a military-style salute.

The sutras and shastras include stories about bodhisattvas who repeatedly begged their gurus for specific teachings that were often as short as a single verse, accompanying their request with vast offerings. Kings are said to have offered everything they owned – their kingdoms, their relatives, their children and spouses. Are these stories about human beings being offered to gurus just legends? No. Over the years even I have been offered human beings by devoted disciples. I haven't kept a strict tally, but I would guess that I have been given somewhere in the region of a hundred people. These people are not slaves or the victims of human sacrifice and usually end up working as attendants, secretaries and managers or becoming monks and nuns and so on. Dedicated and entirely genuine Dharma practitioners still offer me their children – not just symbolically, they physically give me the child. Over the years, several such children have become my attendants.

When it comes to 'offering dakinis', as the word 'offering' is now grossly misinterpreted, my advice to present and future lamas and practitioners is, don't do it. Don't even think about doing it. It's true that dakinis are said to be the sole possessors of the tantra and the longevity of the tantric teachings and teachers lie in their hands. The lamas know about this teaching, as do most Vajrayana Buddhists – we all routinely supplicate the dakinis to lengthen the lives of our gurus. But sometimes, lamas choose to focus on this particular wisdom simply because it aligns with their own wishes and preferences.

This is a classic case of cherry-picking! The practice of 'offering dakinis' is by no means a lama's only option. Buddhadharma offers

a vast treasury of methods for lengthening the lives of all human beings, not just the lamas. Life release, for example, which we practise by freeing animals that have been condemned to death. Another method is to vow to eat vegetarian food for a month, a year or the rest of your life. From the medical point of view, being vegetarian or vegan is healthier than eating meat, plus the merit you gain because animals are not killed to feed you lengthens your life. And you dedicate that merit towards a longer life for your guru.

An old friend asked me recently if a lama's consort is supposed to conform to a specific physical type.

"Why do you ask?" I replied.

"Well, most of the lamas' girlfriends I meet are young and slender, and they are often blonde," she replied. "I have also heard that lamas need the company of youthful girls to inspire them to teach. Is that true?"

Jigme Lingpa said the real cause of obstacles to the length of a lama's life is the waste or misuse of money given as offerings. If the lamas and the lamas' organizations were to stop wasting offering money altogether, all lamas would live much longer lives. It's simply not true that lamas 'need' youthful girls around them to inspire them to teach. The physical type so many lamas go for only displays one of five dakini qualities – the third quality of 'deer-like'. From the perspective of conventional beauty, the other four qualities, which include fangs and a moustache, are now considered undesirable. It's true that the Seven-Line Prayer describes Guru Rinpoche surrounded by a hundred thousand dakinis, but that particular kind of dakini is a sky-walker and not necessarily female. 'Dakini' is a Sanskrit word meaning 'monstrous spirit', or 'ghost', and few exhibit the 'deer-like' quality to which the lamas are attracted. Vajrayogini has a pig's head. Would you sleep with a person with two heads, one of which was a pig? The idea that dakinis are beautiful young girls is now a widespread misunderstanding that probably arose from a mistranslation. In reality, very few real dakinis are beautiful young girls.

A path or practice can manifest in infinite ways. As part of a student's training, the guru might legitimately demand the impossible. If the student is genuinely unable to do as they have been asked, expressing their inability honestly and directly can be very rewarding spiritually and may enhance the guru-student dynamic. The student who, out of pride or a self-righteous belief in right and wrong, refuses even to try to do as he is asked and avoids talking about how he feels, is neither genuine nor honest. When you feel you have no choice but to tell the guru that you cannot do as he asks, the regret you feel could become a highway to unimaginable merit – which is why a savvy guru will often create that kind of situation.

The main point of guru yoga is to instil in students their primary mission, which is to remember the guru. How we remember the guru really doesn't matter. I have seen quite a few people die regretting that they did not do what their guru asked of them. Yet, as Patrul Rinpoche said, a perfect teacher...

“... is equal to all the Buddhas in his compassion and his blessings. Those who make a positive connection with him will attain Buddhahood in a single lifetime. Even those who make a negative connection with him will eventually be led out of samsara.”²¹

Small financial investments involve little risk and earn little profit. If your motivation for attending a teaching or Vajrayana initiation, even the highest, is merely to make a connection with the teacher or the Dharma, the merit you accumulate will be far less than if your goal were enlightenment in this lifetime.

Chödrel is a well established Tibetan tradition of receiving initiations without getting too close to the lama. *Chö* means ‘dharma’ and *drel* means ‘connection’. When Tibetans come to us lamas for a small *chödrel*, we usually respond by reciting a mantra. Why wouldn't someone want to make a strong Dharma connection with a guru? Perhaps they have very little free time to offer. Perhaps

they are not drawn to that guru. Whatever the reason, the bond, or commitment we make with a guru corresponds with how we feel about her. As long as the guru is not an idiot, she will be able to assess a student's degree of commitment and won't ask someone who just wants a blessing to jump off a cliff. It's like going to a celebrity's party just to take a selfie and get her autograph. If the celebrity is sensible, she will see that the autograph collector is just a casual fan and will not ask him to go to bed with her – the negative consequences of which we don't need to go into here.

If you are motivated to meet the celebrity because you want her to help you discover your true nature, your investment in the relationship will be far greater than that of the autograph-collector.

As a beginner on the Vajrayana path, it is extremely unlikely that you will be 100% convinced that the guru is an enlightened being, but you will probably be eager to do your best to perceive her purely. You will also be acutely aware of your own limitations and have doubts about how successful your practice will be. Nevertheless, if you make a conscious decision to ask the guru to give you Vajrayana initiations and teachings, at that moment, all negotiation is at an end. Your choice has been made and there can be no going back. But that doesn't mean you can no longer choose to stop climbing the mountain.

Students: Changing Gurus

What if, halfway up the mountain, you realise your lama is not helping you increase your pure perception? The more time you spend with him, the more doubts you have about both the guru and the path, putting your entire spiritual path in jeopardy. Ask yourself, did you do a good job of analysing the guru before you stepped onto the path? If you did, have you since been knocked sideways by a disturbing revelation and now feel unable to follow this guru?

Here, again, knowledge of the Dharma is your anchor – it really can save you. If you have thoroughly studied and contemplated the Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings, whatever the stumbling block with the teacher, you will never lose confidence in the path itself. You may be unable to continue with your present guru, but your belief and confidence in the Mahayana and Vajrayana make you doubly careful about not burning the seed of other people's aspirations, or creating dramas, ill-feeling, disharmony or schism. Motivated by the purest wish not to break any further samayas or scorch the devotion of your vajra brothers and sisters, you quietly put some distance between yourself and your guru. And by doing so, you accumulate merit.

Alternatively, you may decide that you want to prevent others from falling into the same trap you did by telling the whole world that your guru is a phoney. By warning others, you feel you are doing Buddhadharma a service. You may be right. But your Vajrayana training with that guru is now over. It's finished. From the Vajrayana point of view, you have broken the bond between yourself and your Vajrayana master. And as the master is the quintessence of the Vajrayana path, you have sabotaged your entire Vajrayana path.

If, in spite of all that, your Dharma studies have convinced you that the Vajrayana is the right path, you may decide to look around for another guru – which is a good idea.

If a student changes guru, do they have to start again from scratch? Not necessarily. Whether you go back to the beginning of the path or not will depend on your next guru. If that guru is properly qualified, she will know what your next step should be.

I must repeat myself once again. If, in the middle of your Vajrayana training, you realise you lack the capacity to stay the course and have reached your breaking point, the best thing to do is to put some distance between you and your guru. Just stay away. Stay away so that things don't get any worse. And work on yourself. Listen to and read the Dharma as much as you can. Contemplate everything you

hear and try to develop pure perception. Later on – perhaps a few months or a few years – try gauging how far you have progressed by attending one of your guru’s teachings. If you still can’t cope, stay away for a bit longer and apply more hearing and contemplation.

Your insurance policy throughout the whole process is to study the Dharma, by which I mean hearing or reading the teachings and contemplating them to establish an unshakable confidence in the Buddhist and especially the Vajrayana view.

If, no matter how hard you try, nothing works, you can, if you wish, choose to give up your Vajrayana path entirely. It is up to you. If you consciously give up the Vajrayana path, your connection with the Vajrayana will be finished. But if you continue to embrace the path of the bodhisattva, you can still be a Mahayana practitioner. If you consciously give up the bodhisattva path, your connection with the Mahayana will be finished. But if you continue to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, you can still be a Pratimoksha practitioner. If you consciously give up taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha because you believe it is deceptive and no longer wish to follow the Buddhist path, your connection with Buddhadharma will be completely finished.

From the Vajrayana point of view, giving the path up altogether is a very grave step. The Vajrayana is like a priceless diamond. If you give a diamond to an eight-year-old who then plays marbles with it, the diamond will soon be lost for ever. As a grown-up, you are able to appreciate the diamond’s great value. You therefore engage a diamond cutter to fashion the gem to suit your needs. Unfortunately, your diamond cutter turns out to be quite a contrary character and, after a while, you grow weary of struggling with him over every tiny detail. In a moment of crisis, you are tempted to throw a tantrum, but decide against it because you don’t want anything to happen to the diamond – it would be foolish to risk its loss or damage just because you don’t get on with the cutter. Fortunately, having developed a good understanding of bodhichitta before starting to work with this

particular diamond cutter, you are determined to avoid misleading your beloved family and any other sentient being into believing that the diamond is a worthless piece of glass. So, in spite of your fractious relationship with the diamond cutter, you continue to treasure the diamond and always speak about it enthusiastically.

The lamas make two mistaken assumptions about western and westernized students who choose to follow the Vajrayana path. The first is that all the students who come to them had already developed a revulsion for samsara long before they started to practise the Vajrayana. And the second is that they have already developed bodhichitta and a strong determination never to forsake sentient beings. As a result, the lamas continually fail to check each individual's renunciation and appreciation of bodhichitta *before* giving them Vajrayana teachings and initiations.

No matter how fractured the relationship with their guru, students who have studied the Dharma and truly appreciate its value are unlikely to pursue a vendetta against their guru. After all, a Dharma student's main goal is to practise the Dharma. When students reach for worldly mechanisms, like suing the guru for harassment or abuse when his behaviour upsets them, it's an indication they were never serious about following a path to liberation.

Students of Disgraced Lamas

I know that some long-term students of now disgraced gurus are worried that, having broken with their guru, they will now go to vajra hell. I can understand their concern because it's what we are told in the tantric texts. But getting into vajra hell isn't that easy, and the causes that take us there aren't cut and dried.

The first question you should ask yourself is, did you have a samaya to break in the first place? Only you will know whether or not you consciously and with a sober mind made the decision to step

onto the Vajrayana path, after thoroughly analysing your guru, and so on.

It is not just sex scandals or accusations of physical abuse that turn students away from their gurus. Something as petty as how he blows his nose on his sleeve might be the last straw for some students. But don't worry, a moment of irritation with your guru will not break your root samayas. That will only happen if you have a complete change of heart and mind and, instead of seeing your guru as the Buddha, you decide he is not only an ordinary person, but a real jerk.

As you know, we practise the Vajrayana path to learn how to see absolutely everything we perceive purely and start by training ourselves to see our guru as a buddha. The moment you stop seeing the guru purely, you break your samaya, but samayas are easy to mend through Vajrasattva. A samaya is only broken for good if you experience a complete change of mind. Fleeting thoughts that simply pass through your mind at unguarded moments, like "why is my guru being so impatient" and "my guru is so lazy", are not root samaya-breaking impure perceptions. Although the Vajrayana would never condone such thoughts, they merely make dents in your samayas and are easy to repair through Vajrasattva. Nevertheless, you purify such thoughts to prevent your irritation with your guru from escalating into finding fault with everything he does. If that were to happen, it could easily lead to the kind of change of view and perception that does constitute a serious breakage of samaya.

So the next question is: are you letting your irritation over a relatively small mannerism or character trait get in the way of your relationship with your guru? If you are, try to be more aware of what is going on in your mind.

The most important question to ask yourself is, what do you want from your guru? If you have a tooth ache but your excellent dentist ate raw onions for lunch and has stinky breath, would you leave the surgery before she had a chance to treat you?

Gurus must also make an effort to learn about different cultures' social etiquette and so on. Good table manners might inspire some students, but when working with an individual disciple, the guru might have a good reason for burping after every mouthful. That being said, the guru must never be so provocative that his behaviour turns students away from the Dharma.

Some of the students who consciously chose their Vajrayana guru and have remained steadfastly devoted to him, in spite of scandalous revelations, have nevertheless been shocked by the allegations levelled against him. To make matters worse, within months of the scandal breaking, their beloved guru passed away. If you are one of these students, you may feel stuck in limbo. What should you do now? Stay with your old sangha? Or begin again with another lama? It's up to you. The fact that you want to continue to follow the Vajrayana because you trust the Vajrayana view is proof that your initial analysis of the lama and the path was done well. If you wish to stay with your sangha and help it reinvent itself, then you should do that. If you prefer to look for another lama, yes, by all means, go ahead. Another of the helpful aspects of belonging to a lineage is that it provides a roster of contemporary lamas to choose from. But you must still do a thorough background check before committing yourself to another guru.

How Obedient Should Students Be?

Although you are convinced that your guru will always do his best to guide you to enlightenment, you may start noticing that not everything he says leads directly towards that goal. Does this mean that you should think twice about obeying his commands? No, not at all. If you truly respect, appreciate and trust the guru, you will follow his instructions.

Let's say you are planning a trip to the Victoria Falls in Zambia. Although you have an excellent map, have studied it carefully and are clear about the direction you should take, the map is not the territory. You therefore decide to hire an experienced guide who knows the way. Unfortunately, all the best guides are busy or dead and you have to settle for the only one available, even though you don't like the look of him, and he has a disconcerting habit of scratching his head and picking his nose at the same time. You show him your map and he stares at it as if he has never seen a map before. Although you do eventually get to each day's destination, you always arrive late because your guide takes many wrong turnings and only ever seems to choose the longest possible route. After a while, you start wondering if you should cut your losses and find another guide. But that would waste precious time and, as your guide seems to be heading in roughly the right direction, you decide to stick with him, in spite of his fumbblings, uncertainty and grubby habits.

Obedience is tricky. Trickier still is, how obedient should a student be? I know several students who are so proud of their obedience to their gurus that they make quite an exhibition of it. I also know gurus who like to show off about how obedient their own students are to their guru colleagues. But such displays have nothing to do with the Vajrayana.

When it comes to the practice of obedience, the guru should be even more vigilant than the student about what can realistically be expected. What is the extent of each student's capacity? How much can they take? Realistically, how obedient is it possible for each student to be?

If your guru is unaware of your limitations and you are genuinely unable to carry out his instructions, tell him honestly and respectfully that you just can't do it. For instance, if your guru asks you to speak to a sparrow and you don't know the language, you should tell him, "But I don't know how to speak sparrow." You are not being disobedient, just honest. If your guru insists, remember how

a mother might soothe a fractious baby by pretending to be a bear, then arouse the motivation of sincerely wishing you could follow your guru's instructions. It is never wrong, morally or otherwise, to arouse a pure motivation or make an aspiration.

Obedience is always a challenge for students. Your guru might, for example, ask you to do the entire Ngöndro three times over – and of course you should. Or he might tell you to take your knickers off. Interestingly, a surprising number of people have no difficulty taking off their knickers, but really struggle to finish the Ngöndro.

Bear in mind that although seeing the guru as a perfect buddha and obeying his or her every command sounds like handing your guru all the power (which is far more disconcerting if your guru happens to be a mahasiddha), it also places the guru in an extremely vulnerable position. Students who sacrifice self-determination and faithfully follow the guru's every command free themselves entirely from both responsibility and accountability. Quite a number of students have used their own record of perfect obedience against their guru, either to advance their own agenda or justify their actions. It goes without saying that there is an imbalance of power between guru and student, and in the modern world, the guru's position is significantly more precarious.

What if My Guru Asks Me for Sex?

As the purpose of this book is to ask questions and consider how they might be addressed from as many different angles as possible, ask yourself, what would you do if your guru asked you for sex?

Over the years, I have noticed how unfairly we judge both male and female students who express a sexual interest in a lama. Gurus are regularly approached for sex directly, suggestively, provocatively or flirtatiously, in letters, on social media, or even in videos. Whatever the route, the student is generally condemned as being mad, not just

by the lama but also by the lama's attendants and the entire sangha – mad, mentally unbalanced, crazy and possibly sex-starved. Yet, when the guru expresses a sexual interest in a student, the sangha's reaction is quite different. The guru is not condemned as being crazy or sex-starved, far from it. His sexual interest is, in fact, a shower of blessings. What an honour for the fortunate object of his desire! This is very unfair. Students should be able to express themselves honestly to the guru, and the guru should be courageous and compassionate enough to deal with anything a student has to say to him. As far as the Vajrayana is concerned, it is completely unacceptable for women to be stigmatised, shunned, mocked and categorized as crazy just because they make a play for a guru.

What if a homosexual guru is approached by a woman who wants to have sex? If the guru is a monk, he can tell her that as a monk he is celibate. If he is not a monk, he should explain to the woman that he is not heterosexual. Such conversations require both parties to be truthful and honest – and human. If the homosexual tantric master is good at his job, he knows that to reject the woman's advances will have consequences. If she were to turn her back on the Dharma as a result of his rejection, the Vajrayana would hold the guru responsible. What should the guru do? All Vajrayana gurus must be able to handle this kind of situation.

Few of today's gurus even think of emulating the nun Subhā²² – the Tibetans know her as Utpala – who was so beautiful that a man became inflamed with lust and wouldn't leave her alone. Exasperated by his obsessive behaviour, Subhā asked what it was about her that attracted him. Your beautiful eyes, he replied. So she plucked one out and gave it to him. His lust was instantly quenched, and he finally stopped harassing her. And when Subhā next visited the Buddha, her eye was miraculously restored.

An exemplary Bhutanese nun I know had a similar experience. A man was so infatuated with her that he became violently jealous whenever she talked to other men and was devastated when she

refused to sleep with him on the grounds that she was a nun. His obvious passion for her cost him his business and his family. Yet they remained friends for life and she was able to introduce him to some very good lamas. How compassionate is that! I have always admired how she dealt with that man. As things turned out, he became her lifetime project.

Some very profound Vajrayana teachings explain how to use sexual desire and the sexual act as the path. Quite a few people think this practice can only be done with the guru. It's not true. It can be done with anyone with the same understanding and appreciation for the path that you have, and the same ultimate goal.

Why do there continue to be so many misconceptions, misinterpretations and speculations about the Vajrayana, tantra and sex? Buddhism does not think of sex as a 'sinful' act. Sexual misconduct is what Buddhists call a 'non-virtue'. 'Non-virtue' has not yet been listed in the OED, but I think translators coined it because 'sinful' doesn't make sense in a Buddhist context. The sex act itself is neither virtuous nor non-virtuous, but as it arises out of desire and craving, it can easily distract, overpower and entangle us. Sexual desire may well be the most powerfully numbing of all our desires. It also ties us in complicated knots that are difficult to undo. Long before Freud suggested that we are motivated by our unconscious desires – for sex or food or whatever – the Buddha explained that the realm in which we human beings live is known as the 'realm of desire'. But the point here is, just because an activity has the potential to trigger obsessiveness, it is not automatically 'non-virtuous'. If it were, eating ice cream would be a non-virtuous activity.

In Mahayana Buddhism, bodhisattvas (those who aim to help others) are forbidden to act motivated by a vicious mind, a harmful mind or a wrong view. Other than that, if an action will save or benefit another sentient being, you are encouraged to do it. As desire is the predominant human emotion, the wisdom of Vajrayana Buddhism includes teachings on how to use emotion as the path.

The teachings on how to use sex as the path belong to the highest, most glorious and venerated of Vajrayana paths. But remember, no matter which method you use – offering a flower, fasting or the path of sex – *the method must destroy delusion*. If, instead of destroying delusion, an activity creates more delusion, more self-righteousness, more moralistic judgements, and more pride etc., it is an obstacle to awakening. This point is crucially important and must not be overlooked or forgotten.

Ask Questions

How completely a student is able to obey their guru often comes down to how well prepared they are.

Have you ever asked yourself, “Is my guru truly compassionate? Does he genuinely care for his students? Do I feel cared for by him? Does my enlightenment truly matter to him? If it does, how much does it matter?”

Have you ever asked yourself, “Do I, myself, have any ethical or moral hang-ups?” If, in your past, you suffered emotional or physical trauma – for example, sexual or emotional abuse – have you asked yourself, “Could my history of abuse trigger self-destructive impulses? Will memories of my past lead me to sabotage my relationship with my guru?”

Are you married? Do you feel bound by a strong sense of loyalty to your spouse or partner? Is your guru married? Is your guru a monk or a nun? Are you a monk or a nun?

Does the atmosphere created by the guru, all the Tibetan paraphernalia and his over-zealous entourage, and so on, put pressure on you to comply with any and all his requests? Do you feel backed into a corner? Or are you well aware of everything that is going on, but your passionate longing to smash all concepts to pieces override all other considerations?

These are the kind of questions all Vajrayana students should ask themselves. If you have any doubts, if you feel overwhelmed, if you cannot cope, talk it over with your guru. If you feel you can't talk to him, ask yourself, what is he there for? What is the point of having a guru if he fails to help and protect you?

Having developed trust and belief in your guru, you may well go the extra mile and try to accomplish whatever he asks, as a way of accumulating merit and dismantling your ego and self-clinging. If you have developed a certain level of spiritual maturity, when your guru asks you to do his gardening for him, you will be more than happy to help. Or perhaps your guru will instruct you to go on a pilgrimage.

"Make a pilgrimage to London's Bond Street every day, then keep the whole concept of 'Bond Street' a complete secret. Don't tell anyone that Bond Street even exists."

It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? The whole world already knows about Bond Street, but in the context of this custom-made practice, that detail is irrelevant. From now on, you must keep Bond Street a closely guarded secret. As crazy as it sounds, having consciously and soberly chosen to follow the Vajrayana teachings, going to Bond Street every day has now become your path.

If your guru gives you this kind of practice, don't make an exhibition of it. Unless your guru tells you otherwise, no one needs to see you practise or know when and if you are practising – including your vajra brothers and sisters. Your worldly friends are sure to ask you why, come rain or shine, you walk up and down Bond Street every day, but you must say nothing. No matter how embarrassed you feel, or how often your friends make fun of your obsession or accuse you of having a screw loose, smile and say nothing. By doing so, your practice will accumulate far more merit than if you talked about it.

Telling Lies

Always remember that as Vajrayana practitioners, our main aim and wish is the enlightenment of all sentient beings. We must therefore be careful never to discourage a person's interest in the Vajrayana or give them the ammunition to mistrust or take exception to any aspect of the teaching or the path. Your best option is to avoid saying anything at all about the Vajrayana to those who are not already on the Vajrayana path. If you have to talk about it, lie rather than risk putting someone off this sacred and profound path.

I can hear you thinking, "Isn't it wrong to tell lies?" Ask yourself, don't we all tell lies? When kids cannot sleep, don't parents tell them lies? Like all fairy tales, isn't the story of Cinderella just a charming, magical pack of lies? The willingness to tell such lies is a minor example of a skilful method.

Some students feel abused by their guru, others feel ignored, sometimes for months or years on end. It can be disheartening. But if initially you did a thorough background check, you should have the confidence and courage you need to tell your guru how you feel. There is nothing wrong with that. If he continues to ignore you, all the very good reasons you had for trusting him in the first place will help you interpret his cold-shoulder as a spiritual exercise and a teaching. All this is only possible if you do your homework thoroughly before you step onto the Vajrayana path.

Vows and Promises

THE VAJRAYANA'S SANSKRIT word 'samaya', loosely translated, means 'sacred pledge'. In India, the word 'samaya' is applied to all kinds of organization, objects and even people. A popular daily newspaper is called *The Samaya* and parents name their little girls Samaya but, needless to say, neither have anything to do with the promises or 'samayas' made by Vajrayana practitioners.

Broadly speaking, we keep the Vajrayana samayas by remaining loyal to the truth. What do I mean by 'loyal'? We all know that if we stick our fingers into an electric socket we will be electrocuted and that, at the very least, our fingers will get burnt. By avoiding sticking our fingers into an electric socket, we remain loyal to the truth that electricity burns. Electricity can be dangerous, but as a source of power in this modern world, it is indispensable. Where would we be without electric light, heaters, hot water boilers, toasters, ovens, medical equipment, computers, mobile phones, monitors and radar? I'm told there is even a form of electro-acupuncture for relieving chronic pain.

In spite of its many uses, the truth is that electricity burns, and when it burns, it is simply being true to its nature. By not putting our fingers in the electric socket, we are in harmony with the truth that electricity, by its very nature, burns. This truth will never change and there are no exceptions; electricity burns for twenty-four hours a day, not twenty-three with a break for lunch. This means that, if you suspect a toddler is making a beeline for an electric socket to stick her fingers in it, you will quickly shoo her away.

In addition to being loyal to the truth, samaya is about knowing what to do and how to do it. If you don't know how to swim, nothing

will induce you to jump in at the deep end without wearing water wings. But if you swim like a fish, you will dive in without a second thought.

Keeping samaya is the process of learning how to remain loyal to the truth, one step at a time. Should we learn to keep all the samayas and only then start practising the Vajrayana? No, it doesn't work like that. The moment you are able to keep all your samayas perfectly signals the end of the Vajrayana path.

The point of keeping samaya is to ensure that we live in harmony and remain connected with the truth. Becoming disconnected from the truth is what the Vajrayana calls 'breaking samaya'. How do we maintain our connection with the truth? Through Vajrayana practice. Once diligent Sakya practitioners have received the initiations, they repeat their sadhana practice (remembering you are a deity), four times a day.

The Vajradhara was no idiot, neither were the great tantric and lineage masters of the past. None of these great masters expected new tantric practitioners to keep all their samayas intact from day one. They knew that, from the moment most of us first promise to keep our samayas, we will not only almost immediately break them, but that from then on, we will continue to break them on a daily basis. Why? Because it's not easy to get used to keeping samaya. If you look at dirt and think, "This is dirt", you have broken a Vajrayana samaya. If you look at water and think, "This is water", or look at yourself and think, "This is me", you have broken a Vajrayana samaya. If you have no understanding of the nature of shunyata, buddha nature or the paradox of emptiness and clarity yet try to see yourself as a deity, you have broken a Vajrayana samaya. Whenever duality leads you astray, you have broken a Vajrayana samaya. And the moment you slip from non-duality into duality, you have broken a Vajrayana samaya. Not a moment goes by without any one of us breaking at least one or two samayas. This means that the whole process of so-called Vajrayana practice amounts to little more than keeping samaya.

Newcomers to the path are rarely aware of the sheer number of samayas they are supposed to keep and have yet to realise that, however hard they try, they will never stop breaking them.

If just thinking, “I am Tom and she is Jerry” breaks a samaya, how is it possible for any of us to keep samaya? This is yet another example of how vitally important the practices of hearing and contemplation are on the path. Having heard ample teachings about the view of non-duality and spent enough time contemplating them, you will begin to appreciate the benefits of understanding and abiding by the view, as well as the gravity of straying away from it. You will be eager to keep all your samayas, from the least significant to the most crucial. And the confidence an intellectual understanding of non-duality brings you will help keep any paranoia you have about breaking samaya in check and protect you from getting hung up on feelings of hopelessness and self-condemnation. The consequences of breaking samaya may be grave but knowing about the countless methods you have to mend or purify broken samayas will bring you great joy. You will confidently purify not only your past negative actions, but also those you commit in the future, since past and future are dualistic distinctions. By constantly bearing in mind the Vajrayana’s vast and grand view, your own fears about breaking samaya will neither threaten nor discourage you. Instead, you will relish the Vajrayana’s vast array of methods of purification, such as chanting Vajrasattva’s mantra or gazing at Vajrasattva’s image or inviting your vajra brothers and sisters to gather for tsok feasts. When you purify broken samayas using any of the methods offered by the Vajrayana, siddhis (spiritual accomplishment) will soon follow.

Over the past decade, I started noticing some serious misinterpretations of samaya that need clarifying. We are told that if we break samaya, we shorten our guru’s life, which is like saying, if you do not watch the movie, the movie does not exist. The guru is a manifestation or display of our innate buddha nature. In other words, the guru is the movie projected by our buddha

nature. As practitioners, our goal is to rediscover our buddha nature by connecting with its outer manifestation, the outer guru – the movie. And one of the main factors that makes projecting our guru movie possible is devotion. We therefore only have a guru if we have devotion, in the same way that a person is only likable because we like them. If we break samaya with our guru, our devotion must necessarily have diminished or completely disappeared. Without devotion there can be no reflection of devotion. And as the reflection of our devotion is the guru, without devotion, there is no guru.

Does this mean that if you feel no devotion for your guru, he or she will end up in an Intensive Care Unit? No, of course not. If that were true, students would have the upper hand and be able to control their guru quite easily. They would just have to say: “Hey, if you don’t behave, I’ll revoke my devotion and you’ll end up in hospital!” This point seems to have been misunderstood by a number of tantric practitioners. Perhaps practitioners from Christian cultures have confused Buddhist devotion with the dualistic Christian teaching that Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins?

Put it this way, if there is no demand, there will be no supply. It’s as simple as that. If you break samaya, you will no longer be able to approach your guru with devotion or perceive him purely as the deity; there will therefore no longer be a guru movie for you to watch.

The Vajrayana takes great pride in its unique handling of samaya. Breaking the promises we make as Shravakayana practitioners is like smashing a clay pot: the pieces can be stuck back together again but the cracks will always show. Breaking our Mahayana bodhisattva vow, or any of the Vajrayana samayas is more like denting a golden cup: the dents are easy to fix and the restoration process can make the cup even more beautiful.

The restoration of broken samayas is the Vajrayana’s principal practice. Tantrikas love restoration practices, particularly the *kangshak*: *kangwa* (fulfilment) and *shakpa* (confession). *Kang* is like filling

a vessel and *shak* brings out or exposes your true nature, especially when restoring broken samayas. It's like the English saying, "she brings out the worst in me". In this case, your true nature is exposed by washing away all the temporary dirt that has been obscuring it – like the washing dishes example we looked at earlier in the book. As you wash away the dirt, the cup starts to sparkle and shine; as the cup becomes cleaner, shinier and sparklier, the dirt gradually decreases.

As many of you know, *kang shak* is repeated many times during pujas (Vajrayana ceremonies). In monasteries, monks wear special robes and hats to do this practice, as a way of hyping it up as much as possible. Of all the Vajrayana's many practices for restoring samaya, the supreme method is the *tsok* offering. To mend broken samayas with our root or branch gurus, we do the *kangwa*, *shakpa* and *tsok*. We then ask the lineage gurus, dakinis and Dharma protectors to safeguard us with their compassion. And finally, to prevent us from going astray again, we take the bodhichitta vow.

Avoid Consuming Public Criticisms of Your Vajrayana Guru

On a more practical level, once you have decided who your guru is, try not to listen to or read anything critical about any of the gurus with whom you already have samayas. Most of all, avoid social media.

Public condemnation of Vajrayana gurus' behaviour will never go away. On one level, public reports about how a guru operates can be useful to students doing background checks on potential Vajrayana gurus. Shouldn't a new student be made just as aware of the prevalent negative perceptions of a guru as they are of the positive? That being said, it puzzles me that such a large proportion of the stories published about Vajrayana gurus are so one-sided. After all, if we really do live in a just society that promotes freedom of expression,

shouldn't both sides of every story be presented, without censorship or restraint? Isn't that also one of the principles of good journalism? I had always thought that one-sided reporting was the province of dictatorial propaganda machines, not objective, international news providers.

We must always remember that although disgraced Vajrayana gurus often lose quite a number of their disciples, many remain loyal and devoted. Most of these faithful students are neither potheads nor lama-groupies, but well-educated, smart, kind people who feel they benefited enormously from their guru's teachings. Buddhist magazines should bear this in mind when they publish critical articles about living gurus. I am not saying that critical articles should not be published, just that Buddhist magazines, in particular, should present negative reports responsibly and do their best to avoid inciting bad feeling or sowing the seeds of divisiveness within sanghas. Both sides of every story deserve to be told as objectively as possible. If an interviewee makes a complaint against a guru, shouldn't that guru be given the opportunity to respond? Magazines that claim to be Buddhist should be scrupulous about providing truthful, balanced reporting. They should present as much information as possible about all the different points of view, so that the readers can make up their own minds.

Should Vajrayana Practitioners Associate with Samaya Breakers?

There has been a lot of talk about how Vajrayana practitioners are not supposed to associate with samaya breakers. When a student publicly rejects their guru, the operatic scale of their Vajrayana divorce can lead others to disenchantment and even more broken samayas. This is why I will say, yet again, just how vital hearing and contemplation are for Vajrayana students. I cannot emphasize this strongly enough.

A good, thorough, fundamental knowledge of Buddhadharma helps the student at every stage of the path.

It is true that most Vajrayana practitioners would rather not receive an initiation alongside a known samaya breaker. It is also true that they would be unlikely to marry a samaya breaker. But what is wrong with having a cup of tea with an old friend who happens to have publicly broken samaya? Why make a big hoo-ha about it? All that does is create even more discord and bad feeling within the Buddhist community.

In Tibet, those who were known to have broken the most serious samayas were shunned. What are the most serious samaya breakages? To give up taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is considered to be extremely grave – why this is so should, by now, be self-explanatory. It is obviously not possible to give up taking refuge and remain a Vajrayana practitioner. To give up on bodhichitta and the Bodhisattva Vow is another extremely serious breakage of samaya. Without the foundation of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, whatever your practice, however many hours of meditation you do, you are not practising the path of the Buddhadharma. And without bodhichitta, all Vajrayana practice is reduced to little more than shamanistic voodoo.

Does the Vajrayana sanction punishment for samaya breakers? Of course not! If any of you find a sutra, shastra or tantric text that authorizes a Buddhist institution to punish a Vajrayana samaya-breaker or a Mahayana or Shravakayana vow-breaker by chopping off the perpetrator's hands or burning them to death, and the historical proof that such a punishment was ever implemented by that institution, I will quit my job as a Tibetan Rinpoche.

Sadly, although none of the Vajrayana texts prescribes vicious punishments, it does not mean it never happened. Tibet was ruled by lamas, some of whom committed inexcusable atrocities in pursuit of their own selfish agendas or for political advantage. There are even a number of well-known cases of Tibetan lamas torturing and killing

human beings. But their activities had nothing whatsoever to do with Vajrayana Buddhism. Lamas who commit murder or torment and maltreat other sentient beings are wrong. They were wrong in the past, they are wrong in the present, and if they do it in the future, they will be wrong.

Although Tibetan political history describes assassinations, beheadings and many other forms of villainy, I have never heard of anyone being brutalized for breaking samaya. But the Vajrayana texts do clearly state that Vajrayana practitioners are not supposed to associate with samaya breakers. Where does this practice come from? Let's look at a story about Buddha and his brother, Nanda.

Buddha decided it was time for Nanda to become a monk and so he visited him at his palace. Nanda, a confirmed hedonist, had ordered his staff to tell visitors that he was not at home. In reality, he was too busy with his beautiful lover to be bothered with social chit-chat. When his butler announced that his brother was waiting to speak to him, Nanda felt thoroughly irritated. But not even Nanda could turn the Buddha away.

The moment they met, the Buddha magically transported Nanda to Mount Kailash.

"Who is more beautiful," asked the Buddha, "your lover or that monkey?"

"My lover, of course!" replied Nanda.

So the Buddha transported Nanda to Tushita heaven, where dozens of ravishingly beautiful goddesses were preparing a palace.

"Who is more beautiful," asked the Buddha, "your lover or these goddesses?"

"These goddesses," admitted Nanda. "What are they doing?"

"We are preparing for the arrival of Nanda," said one of the goddesses. "He is about to become a monk! When he dies, the merit of having been a monk will cause him to be reborn here in Tushita heaven, to live with us."

Instantly, Buddha returned them both to India. Nanda was so entranced by his future rebirth amongst the goddesses that he immediately requested ordination. Buddha, fully aware of Nanda's motivation, ordained his brother, but instructed his other monks to avoid associating with him.

As none of the monks spoke to, ate with or remained in the same room as Nanda, he was very lonely.

"Why is everyone avoiding me?" he asked the Buddha.

"My monks seek a different goal to the one you seek," replied the Buddha. "You are on a different journey."

The point of the story is that we cannot go both right and left at the same time. We have to choose one way or the other. And as most of us are easily manipulated by causes and conditions, if a friend decides to follow a path that contradicts your own view, it is probably best to avoid risk being influenced by them. That being said, a guru might instruct a more accomplished practitioner to rub shoulders with samaya breakers as a method for enhancing their practice and possibly even try to steer the samaya breaker back to the right path.

The Vajrayana has another reason for advising practitioners to avoid those who hold a radically different view. Other Buddhist paths work directly with the mind and see the body as little more than mind's vessel. For the Vajrayana, body, speech and mind are of equal importance; in fact, they are one. The Vajrayana practices of prana, bindu and nadi are associated with body, speech and mind and easy to manipulate. Less accomplished Vajrayana practitioners are therefore advised to protect their prana, bindu and nadi by avoiding people who hold drastically different views.

Unfortunately, many practitioners choose to focus on 'you must not associate with samaya breakers' and completely forget that, as Mahayana practitioners, their bodhichitta practices are to love and care for all sentient beings, including samaya breakers, and to work tirelessly for their enlightenment. Such is the human mind. We all

tend to cherry-pick the aspects of a path that we think will work for us, and forget about the rest.

If we were to avoid meeting everyone who had ever broken samaya, we would drink tea in solitude for the rest of our lives. But how do you recognize a samaya breaker? How do you know whether someone has or hasn't broken samaya? In my experience, the most obedient and disciplined-looking practitioners are usually the ones who break the most samayas, and the outspoken, rough diamonds are the best at keeping them.

The roots of the Vajrayana are in the Mahayana, the signature practice of which is never to abandon sentient beings. According to the Vajrayana, a samaya breaker is under the control of their own negative emotions. Recognizing this, as fellow Vajrayana practitioners, we have even more reason to be compassionate and caring. If a member of your family fell sick, wouldn't you willingly jump at the opportunity to help them?

Those who talk a lot about broken samayas love to dwell on vajra hell. The Vajrayana's more vocal critics often accuse Tibetan lamas of using the threat of vajra hell to browbeat students into submissive obedience. Maybe they haven't heard about Vajrasattva? Chant one Vajrasattva mantra wholeheartedly and *all* your defilements – past, present and future – are completely purified. It's a bit unfair to make a big thing of vajra hell without bothering to mention Vajrasattva practice.

Abhisheka, Initiation, Empowerment

I will now shamelessly plagiarize an allegory that the great masters of the past have quoted again and again.

Let's say you are a billionaire's only son. You are young and curious and greedy for new experiences. One weekend, you fly to Marrakesh and lose yourself in its exotic bazaars and colourful souks. Everyone

you meet offers you peculiar drinks and odd delicacies, all of which you sip and swallow, refusing nothing. In a particularly dingy coffee house, you sample the delicious Marrakeshi equivalent of Indian soma. Almost instantly you suffer some kind of fit and pass out. When you wake up you are alone, your body is black and blue, your pockets are empty and you remember nothing, not even your name. Your only option is to beg, scrounge and steal to stay alive.

One day, a boy crashes his bicycle into a wall and the front wheel falls off. To your surprise, you know how to fix it. The boy is grateful and returns the next day with his uncle, who asks if you will help out in his bicycle shop. By the following year you have moved into the family's tiny home and they have given you a new name: Fiqdan Aldhaakirat Al'iinjilzii, which means 'the English amnesiac' – Dan for short. The years roll by, you marry one of the uncle's daughters and start your own family. Life is hard and you are often hungry.

Two decades later, an American turns up out of the blue.

"Your father died two years ago and left you his entire fortune," says the American, "some billions of dollars. You are his sole heir and your family wants you to return to America to take control of the family empire."

This is exactly what happens in an initiation. The Mahayana, and especially the Vajrayana, tells us that although we human beings are buddhas and therefore entitled to inherit the entirety of the Buddha's wealth, we have forgotten our true identity and therefore roam aimlessly in samsara for lifetime after lifetime. Only when we receive an initiation and our Vajrayana guru kindly introduces us to our true nature do we find out who we really are – at least, that is what is supposed to happen. This is the sole reason for giving an initiation.

Let's get back to our story. Although you have no memory of being a billionaire's son, you retain the air of an educated, entitled member of the elite. A sense of unease continuously nags away at the back of your mind which, combined with the drudgery of an undemanding,

menial job that barely pays the bills, leaves you feeling lonely and depressed. Surely, you think, there must be more to life than this?

We are extremely lucky if our sadness is accompanied by the sense that this life can't be all there is, there must be more. Without this kind of luck, it is easy to lose heart – "I'm a nobody; there is no future for someone like me."

The life you lead in Morocco is the opposite of that of a billionaire. The idea that you might be a billionaire's son never occurs to you – it is unthinkable. But deep down, you know that you are more than just a bicycle mechanic. The question is, are you ready to hear what the strange American, your father's envoy, has to tell you? Are you ready to hear that you are a rich man's son? Can you accept that you have been living a lie for decades? Are you confident that you are now able to embrace the real you? Whether you are ready or not depends entirely on causes and conditions.

Having been virtually destitute for their whole lives, many people dare not believe in and are unable to accept good fortune. When confronted with the truth, they take it the wrong way. The tantras say that those who dare not think beyond their current situation lack 'superior faculties'. People with superior or even middling faculties are braver and more adventurous than those with the least capacity. Basically, the bolder the disciple, the greater their capacity.

Whether or not you can believe and accept that you really are the heir to a vast business empire also depends on how the envoy breaks the news. If you are too timid to be able to imagine a different life for yourself, the envoy's chances of convincing you that he speaks the truth are slim. His only hope is to break the news very gently.

For the envoy, the task of finding the heir to a great fortune and future CEO of the Hunt Corporation is a big responsibility. Only when the right person has been installed as Chief Executive will the business revive and thrive, saving tens of thousands of jobs. The last thing the envoy wants to do is alienate his late boss's heir, but he

is not a skilful man. He barges into the bicycle repair shop and, without preparing you in any way, he drops his bombshell.

“Hello Mr Hunt, your father is dead and you have inherited his entire fortune, which currently stands at around \$600 billion. Your family want you to return to America to take control of the business. Your private plane is at the airport, we leave tonight.”

You are stunned and horrified. “Me? You have made a big mistake. I’m just a bicycle mechanic! I know my place. And my family is here, in Marrakesh. They need me.”

The envoy has been clumsily assertive and aggressive and you simply don’t believe him. You feel bullied and pushed around. The idea that you might be the son of a billionaire is like a slap in the face, and you become defensive and recalcitrant.

Had the envoy been wiser, he would have done a background check before introducing himself. He should have asked your neighbours about what kind of a man you are, then tried to get to know you. And he should have taken his time. Only once he had a clear idea of how best to approach you, should he have started introducing you to who you really are – perhaps by showing you photos of your family and your old home. Basically, if the envoy had put more thought into how to talk to you, if he had tried to put himself in your shoes and been more sensitive to your situation, you would have had a much better chance of hearing the truth.

This is what happens in an abhisheka. It’s why abhisheka is so precious and the one occasion in life that is truly worth celebrating. A billion birthdays, christenings, weddings, anniversaries, thanksgivings and Christmases all rolled into one don’t come close to the kind of celebration you should have the day you receive your first abhisheka and finally come into your rightful inheritance – the inexhaustible wealth of the Buddha.

Fair Warning

When an abhisheka is given properly, the guru advises caution and warns recipients about what they are getting themselves into. At one point, the warning is repeated three times, at another six times and sometimes more. Two specific warnings are always given. One sounds like a threat: if you don't do what you have promised to do, there will be trouble. The other urges you to take advantage of the precious opportunity you are being offered: don't miss the chance of a lifetime.

Gratitude

Perhaps now you are beginning to appreciate how grateful we should be to the masters who so skilfully introduce us to the truth in a way we can hear and understand. Today, Vajrayana teachers initiate hundreds and thousands of people into the Vajrayana without even knowing their names. Mind-boggling as this may sound, initiates often don't know the name of the lama who is bestowing the initiation. Gurus and students barely analyse each other for twelve minutes, let alone twelve years. This is why celebrations are the order of the day when aspiring Vajrayana students set their hearts on receiving a specific initiation, admire the Vajrayana path and truly respect the Vajrayana teacher who is empowering them.

Let's say your dying mother gives you a small package containing a family heirloom.

"Daughter, don't lose this gift. One day it will save you."

You love and trust your mother, so you store the package somewhere safe and forget about it. Years later, your business goes belly up and you have to sell your home. As you pack up your belongings, you come across the package, open it and discover a priceless diamond ring so valuable that you no longer have to file for bankruptcy. Imagine how grateful you would be.

At an especially stressful time in your life you meet a shamatha teacher. You learn how to calm your mind and, as a result, many of your stress-related physical ailments disappear. Wouldn't you feel

grateful to the teacher who taught you the technique and introduced you to the path? Wouldn't you want to share what you had learned with all your stressed-out friends?

Imagine meeting someone who helps you realise that 'you' has nothing to do with any of the labels you habitually use to describe yourself and that therefore, nothing you value matters. This person also shows you how to avoid falling into the trap of 'labels', 'values' and 'distinctions'. Suddenly, you are free. Other people's judgements, ambitions, goals, failures and successes no longer limit you. How grateful would you be to the person who made your liberation and freedom possible?

Abhisheka is often said to be the door to the Vajrayana because during the ceremony, we reconnect with our true nature and realise that all our aggregates – form, feeling, thoughts, emotions, activities – are buddhas. For this reason, the day you receive your first abhisheka, the guru you receive it from becomes more important to you than Jesus Christ, Mohammed, and even Shakyamuni Buddha.

Atmosphere

Personally, I always try my best to think of all my gurus as mahasiddhas. Everyone who received an abhisheka from any one of them, formally or casually, made a connection with them. Even the pilots of the planes my gurus flew in made a connection with them. One of my gurus' most skilful methods was to switch the emphasis of a teaching to suit the audience. When giving an initiation to tens of thousands of people, they would focus on loving kindness and bodhichitta. When they gave the initiation to a much smaller, invitation-only audience, they would start early in the morning or in the middle of the night to avoid big crowds gathering and emphasize the uniqueness of the opportunity the initiates were being given. Either way, it was the same initiation.

Abhisheka is the most sophisticated of all the Vajrayana's methods for arranging causes and conditions; its driving force is motivation.

And the vajra master creates the atmosphere of abhisheka by explaining its history, lineage and origins.

My point is that how an abhisheka is set up, how it manifests and the atmosphere it creates always has an effect on the initiates. If I had to give thousands of Tibetans an Avalokiteshvara initiation, I would do it in a huge, echoey hall with loudspeakers blaring, kids running here and there, friends and families sitting in clusters, chatting and laughing, legions of monks distributing saffron rice and butter tea, old people spinning prayer wheels and teenagers texting. But if two new Russian students from Vladivostok begged me for the same initiation, the setup would be quite different. I might, for example, ask the Russians to meet me at a secret location on the Atlantic coast. Getting there is stressful and expensive, yet the Russians willingly change planes five times and hire a car because they have set their hearts on receiving this particular initiation and are enthusiastic about doing whatever it takes to get it. Eventually we meet at a beautiful, secluded beach. To intensify the unique character of the initiation, I set up a pure white parasol and sit on a cushion with the initiation gear laid out next to me on a simple cotton cloth. The two Russians, dressed in white, sit on the golden sand in front of me and I sprinkle water from a shell I found on the beach.

The atmosphere created for each group could not be more different. The Tibetans are more comfortable receiving initiation in a busy, crowded hall and the Russians are more inspired by the beach initiation. But they all receive exactly the same initiation.

Another approach I might use is to summon a deeply devoted student to a Christian cemetery at 1 a.m. to give her the dakini initiation she has requested. The location of an initiation depends entirely on the needs of the student. But in the modern world, if a Vajrayana guru is discovered performing any form of ritual secretly, no matter how innocent, the guru and the Vajrayana itself is likely to be ridiculed and labelled as a dangerous cult.

Sadhana

Once you have soberly and consciously made the decision to step onto the Vajrayana path, prepared yourself properly and received an abhisheka, if, rather than ‘love thy neighbour’, your guru tells you to steal her sandwich, you must take his instruction seriously. If your guru tells you the world is flat, from then on, a flat world is your sadhana – even if you are a professor of astrophysics. If your guru tells you to visit Bond Street at least once this lifetime, your holy pilgrimage will be to London’s Bond Street. And if your guru tells you to get elected as the president of Russia, you must do everything possible to accomplish that goal. Preparing for your election is your practice of renunciation, so you learn the Russian language, read up on Russian politics and find out how to emigrate to Russia and so on. All your preparations are merit-making activities and must be carried out wholeheartedly, come what may. If, in the process, you neglect your job, get the sack and end up living on the Australian social benefit system as a social outcast, so be it.

You are not stupid. You know full well that, however hard you try, it is extremely unlikely that you will ever be able to move to Russia, let alone get elected president. Nevertheless, you take all your preparations seriously because your practice of renunciation, your ‘sadhana’, is to work towards accomplishing that goal. By doing so, you realise that everything, including life itself, is a joke. The vagrant whose goal is to become the president of Russia is as much of a joke as the vagrant who turns up at a social security office once a fortnight to sign for the dole.

In this day and age, the chances of meeting a guru who is willing to give such teachings and instructions are very slim. The safest, standard instruction a Vajrayana guru can give is “finish your Ngöndro”; the most radical he could give in the 21st century is “go on pilgrimage to India” or “marry your boyfriend” (the boyfriend you

had already agreed to marry, albeit half-heartedly). Most of today's gurus are themselves victims of social expectation. I doubt any one of them has the guts to give students the riskier, more ridiculous-sounding instructions. The time of the truly courageous guru seems to be over. But I wish, from the bottom of my heart, that you could all meet such a guru.

Pure Perception

I have a feeling that when the tantric practice of pure perception was originally presented in the West, its packaging and marketing somehow backfired. The English expression, 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' hits the nail on the head. Everything we see, hear and imagine is our own projection. Once again, when I say 'everything' I really mean *everything*! From the kindness and heroism we see in Nelson Mandela's eyes, to the shiver of horror induced by the sight of Adolf Hitler's toothbrush moustache.

You believe that freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, whereas your brother believes that the expression of too many uninformed opinions in the public domain only creates friction, conflict, and social unrest. Each person's opinion and belief is based on their own unique perception. Everything we perceive – beauty, ugliness, tasty, tasteless, sweet, sour, good, bad, black, white – is in the eyes, ears, nose, touch, tongue of the beholder. In other words, how things appear, sound, taste, feel and so on, is not what they really are. 'Appearances can be deceptive' is another common expression; if you realise this truth, 80% of your pure perception practice has already been accomplished.

The paradox of the union of appearance and emptiness, sound and emptiness, taste and emptiness, touch and emptiness, and smell and emptiness must also be understood. In this case, the paradox is that each pair are inseparable. Appearances do not manifest a second

before emptiness, and vice versa; heat does not manifest a second before fire, and vice versa.

Perceptions that are 100% pure are what tantra calls ‘devotion’, as is the belief that your guru has buddha nature. In the same way that a geologist is not mistaken when she looks at a pile of ore and thinks of it as pure gold, a tantric student is not mistaken when he looks at his often sleepy, sometimes grumpy guru – who prefers red wine to white – and believes that what he feels is devotion. He *is* feeling devotion. And devotion is not one-sided. The vajra master must also regard each of his students with exactly the same purity of perception – like a master chef whose mouth waters as she surveys the pile of ingredients from which she will create a delicious new dish. But in the vajra master’s case, pure perception is called ‘compassion’ and ‘kindness’.

If students lack a basic intellectual understanding of pure perception and devotion and fail to apply them properly, the guru can easily misuse both by turning them into a sophisticated system of brain washing. This is how some lamas abuse their students, which has happened far too often over the centuries.

A great Sakya master once said that you must first try to meditate on the guru as a buddha, then try to see the guru as a buddha, but the endgame is always to realise that *you* are a buddha. This is what guru yoga is all about. Always remember that a guru will be fully aware that none of his students are capable of seeing him as a buddha from day one – as I have already said, it takes a long time. A guru who expects instant pure perception and expresses disapproval or even punishes students who cannot immediately see him as a buddha, is not only *not* a qualified vajra guru, he lacks all common sense.

By the way, what does ‘seeing the guru as a buddha’ really mean? How many of our horny, greedy gurus would be happy for their students to perceive them as Shakyamuni Buddha? The Buddha begged for his food, never had sex and never held money in his hands. If a guru’s students really do see him as Shakyamuni Buddha,

should they therefore offer him alms every morning? How many gurus would want their students to see them as pig-headed or horse-headed deities? Might a guru be insulted if his students visualized him as a deity with extra heads? “Aren’t I good enough as I am? Why do you need to visualize that extra head?” Would a guru get angry if his students continued to serve him breakfast, lunch and dinner, thus proving that they do not see him as the Vajradhara? Would he prefer his students to offer him a kapala of blood? And shouldn’t students who offer their guru a kapala of fresh blood be given a reward for being able to see him as the Vajradhara? A clever, kind, good guru would never harbour such outlandish, ridiculous expectations. Buddhas have no preferences; if the guru really were a buddha, if he were offered a plateful of shit for his lunch, he would eat it without batting an eyelid.

Students who see their guru with golden skin don’t win extra points, neither do those who see him as the great Vajravarahi and hear her grunt. But once a student can see the guru as a buddha, she will have crossed over samsara’s borders and become a sublime being. No Vajrayana guru worth his salt would expect a student to achieve this on day one, in twelve months or even twenty-five years.

Initially, new students should focus on learning to accept that everything they perceive, good and bad, is their own projection and, on that basis, they should train themselves to see the guru as a buddha. But again, the question arises: what does ‘see the guru as a buddha’ really mean? It means you learn to recognize that the form, shape, size, colour and gender in which you see your guru is an impure perception. In this context, ‘impure’ does not mean dirty or bad in the ordinary sense, it means ‘dualistic’. Therefore numbers (like one and two) are impure; the concept of size (big and small) is impure; and gender (male and female) is impure. Basically, everything dualistic that we cling to is impure. As students, we train our minds by first acknowledging that everything we see and interact with falls into the sphere of ‘dualistic perception’. Yet, the true nature

of the infinite number of seemingly impure dualistic distinctions we make is emptiness. So the true nature of all phenomena is non-dual. Nothing is truly bound by time, gender, colour, shape, nationality and so on. Therefore, as the tantric texts repeat again and again, to enhance our recognition of non-duality, we must try to remember that all that appears is the outward form of the guru, all sounds are sounds made by the guru, and all our own thoughts, including whatever you are thinking right now, is the guru's wisdom.

EIGHTEEN

What Now?

THE FUTURE OF the Buddhadharma and the happiness of every single sentient being on this planet depend, as they always have, on the merit of human beings. As I write, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread and mutate. Right now, there is no clear end in sight. I hope that, if nothing else, this virus has taught us that in the grand scheme of things, we human beings are painfully insignificant. We barely register as a force in this universe. Think about it, what has the human race actually achieved? None of our universities, parliaments, senates or central committees fulfil their promises or accomplish their goals. All anyone does is list possibilities then describe events as they play out. Governments sound more like the weather forecasters than anything else, but less believable. No one seems capable of making accurate predictions or effecting the slightest change. Even preparing for the inevitable is beyond us.

What all human beings do have is a mind, a cognisance. Mind is neither good (loving, compassionate, kind) nor bad (angry, jealous), it's just mind. Right now, you are reading this sentence using your mind. The sounds you hear are interpreted by your mind and everything you feel is processed by your mind. Mind is not a myth, it's a brazen reality. Mind is here, right now, in all of us. And as mind is our single most powerful asset, shouldn't we start learning how to appreciate and take full advantage of it?

The first step is to generate a profound wish to invest everything we have in learning how to use our minds. To do that, we need merit. Merit is indispensable. It's also the one thing we can create for ourselves. Without merit, we can do nothing – a fact that we must all find a way of stuffing into our thick skulls.

The role Buddhist teachers play in Buddhism's future will be comparatively small, as will the availability of translations, source texts, libraries and so on. It will not be the eloquence of Buddhist teachers that determines how every word Shakyamuni Buddha taught is delivered, received, interpreted and put into practice, but the merit of human beings.

Given the pre-eminence of science and secularization in the West, is there a place for a spiritual tradition like Buddhism, steeped as it is in faith, ritual and storytelling? Of course there is! This world has always been driven by great stories. Historically, stories about gods and demons, heavens and hells, heroes and villains have been told over and over again, most of which have now been relegated to the category of myth and legend. Our 21st century stories are about democracy, socialism and the economy, and our belief in these stories is what spurs us on.

The one obvious exception is mind, our cognisance or awareness; mind is not a story. The cognisance of the person reading this book is not a story. You, the reader, are cognisant; this book is not. Although the cognisance of all sentient beings is undeniable, the nature of that cognisance is still a mystery. We don't know what cognisance is. We have no clue about how to handle it or deal with the emotions, judgements and values it spawns. As a result, we suffer pain, anxiety, panic, depression and all the rest of it – which is precisely why Gautama Buddha and his followers invested so much time and effort in teaching us how to alleviate all our sufferings by working with our mind.

Are people today clever enough or, as the Buddhists would say, do they have enough merit to want to look inwardly? Yes, I believe they do. And for those who long to look at their minds, the Buddhadharma is far more than merely relevant.

Inevitably, the rituals, methods and symbols employed by the Buddhadharma will evolve and change. That's fine, just as long

as the view remains intact. But the Buddhadharma itself will only survive if people still want to study and practise its teachings. So, for the sake of future generations, we must now create a huge demand for the Dharma by finding ways of presenting the teachings that will attract more people's interest and curiosity. Again, it's a case of supply and demand. If enough people want to know about Buddhadharma, a good supply of the appropriate material will continue being produced for decades to come. All of which means that a fervent aspiration to propagate and turn the wheel of the Dharma may end up accomplishing more than study, contemplation, hearing, and building institutions and universities ever could.

When it comes to taking responsibility for maintaining an enthusiasm for the continued study and practice of Buddhadharma, Buddhist teachers, including Vajrayana masters, stand in the front line. Now, more than ever, we need excellent teachers. Few Tibetan teachers have been able to pierce the minds of non-Tibetans, mostly because they are limited by their own Tibetanness. Unlike the Canadian Jesuit priests, whose passionate wish to spread the word of God took them to Peru and central Africa, the only passion Tibetan lamas ever display is for building traditional temples and monasteries. Too often, the Tibetan lamas' institutional responsibilities overshadow all other considerations. The non-Tibetan students of such lamas are far more likely to get a medal pinned to their chest for speaking Tibetan fluently than for arriving at the unwavering conviction that life really is impermanent. Do Tibetan lamas even notice how eager, even desperate, their non-Tibetan students are to practise the Dharma?

When quite a high lama and his entourage visited Lerab Ling in the south of France, all it took to convince him that the Dharma had been established at Lerab Ling was the sight of its large Tibetan-style gumpa and he immediately declared that Sogyal Rinpoche was the only lama to have properly established the Buddhadharma in the

West. This comment says it all. And in the few hours he and his party spent at the centre, they barely scratched the surface of what Lerab Ling had to offer.

Buddhadharma and the Vajrayana made up the very fabric of Tibetan life. This is why the Tibetans continue to produce the most amazing practitioners. We have no idea where they live or what they do, but these practitioners genuinely uphold the Vajrayana tradition and, as such, represent the future of the Vajrayana path. I just wish a few were able to understand the psychology behind books like *Catcher in the Rye* and appreciate why Nietzsche liked Buddhism, albeit for all the wrong reasons.

Whether by accident or design, Tibetan lamas spearheaded the 20th century introduction of Buddhadharma into the West, and they owed much of their success to the remarkable enthusiasm westerners have for going beyond duality. But the days of Tibetan lamas being the sole holders of the Vajrayana lineages are numbered. I would be surprised if, in twenty years' time, Tibetans retained any kind of authority in the Tantrayana, especially when I look at the new generation of teachers – particularly those with titles.

Even so, it's not that easy for non-Tibetans to take on the job of general Buddhist teacher, let alone teacher of the Vajrayana. When non-Tibetans start teaching the Vajrayana they often face disapproval and opposition, but not from the Tibetans. Most of the opposition comes from other non-Tibetan teachers. And as non-Tibetans often know more about every aspect of Buddhadharma than most Tibetans, it rarely has anything to do with the would-be teachers lack of knowledge. I find this very interesting. The Tibetans go to the other extreme and shell out letters of endorsement like there's no tomorrow.

If only aspiring non-Tibetan Buddhist teachers would develop the same kind of passion for spreading the Dharma that Jesuit priests have for spreading the Gospel. Enthusiasm accomplishes so much! Perhaps aspiring teachers who read this book could try channelling

their zeal beyond merely writing articles and creating YouTube courses. Buddhists who are not selfish and genuinely care about introducing others to the Dharma always attract positive attention and inspire trust. A teacher's genuine concern for the Dharma is often their most attractive quality. Experts can be impressive when it comes to presenting facts, theories and complicated philosophies. But the person who has the most effect is the tireless volunteer who serves coffee after a Dharma talk, and goes out of her way to introduce new people to the expert. Her palpable enthusiasm for and conviction in the Dharma is infectious and most of us respond better to unvarnished, unselfish, heartfelt enthusiasm than to endless lists and definitions.

As we try to draw more people's attention to the Dharma, please try to embody the kind of irresistible enthusiasm and concern that others find so attractive. I feel sure that, in future, a non-Tibetan teacher's single most important quality will be their longing to introduce the Buddhadharma to every single sentient being on this planet. I have met many practitioners over the years who embody this quality, but they are rarely Buddhist teachers, authors, scholars, professors, or Buddhadharma-promoting yoga teachers. More often than not, it is the single working mother of three whose longing to connect everyone she knows with the Buddhadharma is so intense that she willingly goes the extra mile to spread the word. This kind of enthusiasm does more for Buddhadharma than all the Buddhist professionals on the planet. (The luxury of anonymity and not having a Dharma title to live up to or responsibilities to maintain may also help.) Enthusiastic volunteers have the ability to communicate one-to-one with friends and loved ones without seeming overbearing or dogmatic. I always include them in my prayers for the long life of the Dharma holders.

The Future of the Vajrayana

The lamas of the past often talked about the intense barrage of obstacles that were flung at Siddhartha as he sat under the Bodhi Tree. The ferocity of the attack was the most intense he had ever experienced and continued to escalate until a split second before his enlightenment.

Over the centuries, Buddhadharma as a whole has faced numerous outer, inner and secret obstacles. No matter how many obstacles today's followers of the Buddhadharma and especially Vajrayana practitioners face, you should never feel discouraged. Remind yourself that the better you are as a practitioner, the bigger, stronger and more effective the obstacles will be. Clever tantric students choose to interpret all obstacles as signs of progress; rather than allowing themselves to be crushed by adversity, obstacles provide them with excellent opportunities to raise their game.

To be anxious about the future of Buddhism in the modern world and to worry that the Dharma and the Vajrayana might soon be obsolete are signs that your knowledge of Buddhadharma is slight. There is nothing to worry about.

From the Shravakayana to the Vajrayana, every word of the Buddha's Dharma is dynamic and progressive. Anything that, at first glance, looks regressive has been adopted from the cultures into which Buddhism was imported – Tibet, Japan, China and so on. And who really gives a damn about culture? Culture, which is constantly changing, can provide help and support, but more often than not it's a hindrance.

Buddha said 'all compounded things are impermanent'; this wisdom cannot be updated. 'How something appears is not what it is' does not need modifying. Teachings on shunyata are neither archaic nor outdated and cannot be adjusted. On the contrary, all the Buddha's teachings are both consistently forward-thinking and contemporary.

The Vajrayana view and practice of pure perception – for example, perceiving the guru purely – is not obsolete and needs no alteration. As we have seen, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and the truth of the Vajrayana can never be redesigned. Buddha saw that self is an illusion. Although it may be possible to adjust some of the techniques we use to realise that truth – such as standing instead of sitting straight as you meditate or even standing crooked – any adjustment must always contribute towards the realisation that self is an illusion.

The Vajrayana tells us that we are the deity, where we dwell is the mandala and all other beings are also deities. To enhance our practice of pure perception, we use the technique prescribed by the Vajradhara – the Primordial Buddha – of trying to see the guru as the embodiment of all the buddhas. Having thoroughly analysed a Vajrayana teacher, taken him or her as our Vajrayana guru and received the abhisheka, from that moment on, we must maintain a pure perception of our guru. That is our practice, our technique and our path.

Everyone experiences ups and downs with their guru. At some point, everyone questions their guru's instructions and even refuses to do as he asks. But the point of pure perception practice remains the same. A Vajrayana practitioner's job is to see the guru as the embodiment of all the buddhas, and themselves and their surroundings as the mandala. We cannot perceive the guru impurely and we must obey all the guru's instructions. This Vajrayana technique and training cannot be changed or altered. Anyone who adjusts the practice of pure perception in any way is no longer practising the Vajrayana.

I repeat, the Vajradhara *never* said that if this path sounds exciting and fun, you should just jump in without thinking. He *never* said just go for it! He advised caution over and over and over again. The Vajradhara's prescription for following a Vajrayana guru *cannot* be amended, reformed or customized. If you adapt, improve or revise

the prescription, the result will no longer be a Vajrayana practice. This is not my personal interpretation, it has been clearly stated in numerous tantras and repeated many times over in texts venerated by all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. This was the point I was attempting to defend in my public statements and teachings after the 2017 scandal broke. If the Vajrayana path sounds like a throwback to feudal times, if you don't trust it or feel suspicious about any aspect of the path or practice, for your own good, you should avoid tantra like the plague.

Buddhists are human beings. From time immemorial there have been good Buddhist practitioners and teachers, and bad Buddhist practitioners and teachers. It is definitely not true to say that there are more bad teachers now than there ever have been – we must be careful not to make that kind of assumption.

Future Vajrayana teachers must never forget the Shravakayana and the Mahayana teachings. I would trust a Vajrayana teacher who teaches 90% Shravakayana and Mahayana, and 10% Vajrayana, just so long as that teacher also walks the talk. As teachers should live everything they teach, they should never harm a single sentient being – not even the tiniest insect, let alone their own students. Teachers should certainly never burn the seed of an individual's aspiration to follow the Buddhadharma. And of course, a teacher should never kowtow to modern social expectations and political correctness. If he does, it is a sign that he is corruptible and persuadable, and that he does not think outside the box. It is all too easy for a kowtowing teacher to get stuck inside the box of convention, and for his students to get stuck there with him.

Since 2017, I have been very concerned about various public statements that have been made about the Vajrayana. Not only have a number of observers and students of the Vajrayana teachings appeared to suggest that it might be possible to correct and change the Vajrayana, but so have one or two Tibetan teachers. Unfortunately, the wording of these statements is ambiguous – which in itself is

dangerous. As we all know, every word we upload online is preserved in cyberspace forever. Worse still, the impression these teachers give is that, even after completing all the Vajrayana prerequisites, trainings and analysis, and after receiving an initiation with a clear, conscious and sober mind, if a teacher misbehaves in a specific way, students are ‘allowed’ to stop practising pure perception of their guru and they are ‘allowed’ to criticize him. But the point here is not about students being allowed to do anything; allowing or not allowing are just worldly concepts. If you criticize your guru after receiving initiation from him, the marriage is over. In the ordinary world, you can take your Vajrayana master to court and mince his reputation to death if you wish. Whether you should or not is not for me to say; you are free to do whatever you like. But taking a lama to court to enforce worldly justice has nothing to do with the Vajrayana.

Here again, please remember that if you received an initiation from a guru on the spur of the moment and therefore didn’t have time to analyse him thoroughly or failed to make a conscious decision about stepping onto the Vajrayana path, nowhere in the Vajrayana texts does it say that you must now obey his every instruction and consider him to be perfect. Nowhere!

The ultimate point of dismantling all impure perceptions is to demolish your dualistic mind. And as we all know, give duality an inch and it will take a mile – in this case miles and miles and miles. Always remember, everything you perceive is your own, individual projection. Which begs the question: whose perception should you rely on when it comes to judging whether or not your guru’s behaviour justifies perceiving him impurely?

Under no circumstances should any of us even attempt to change the Vajrayana’s core teachings. By changing just one word, you effectively take on full responsibility for the spiritual path and enlightenment of *all future practitioners*. I, for one, lack the courage to do such a thing.

For more than forty years I have mingled with and observed thousands of European, Australian, South American, Canadian, North American, Slavic, and even Middle Eastern Tibetan Buddhist students and practitioners. We have drunk tea and coffee together, enjoyed heated debates and engaged in long, protracted arguments. We have even dated. I continue to be fascinated by photography and movie making. I do my best to read as many books as I can – great world literature, history, science, philosophy and so on. I have even tried to understand why Picasso is considered to be an artistic giant. And the more I discover about people born outside my own Tibetan-Bhutanese Buddhist world, the more curious I become.

Right now, things look a bit grim for tantric practitioners. But perhaps we are being a bit too hard on ourselves. Scandals about people we care about are upsetting and disappointing, but the discussions and clarifications such scandals trigger are invaluable, even vital. Opening our minds to many different points of view and clarifying misunderstandings is how we grow and develop, which is exactly what contemporary tantric practitioners need to do. Buddhadharma, especially the Vajrayana, is still new to the West. It would be unfair to expect such a profound tradition to be incorporated perfectly into umpteen new cultures in just a few decades. It will happen, but it will take a little time.

Where there are human beings, there will always be misunderstandings, complications, hiccups, misfortunes and scandals. Obstacles are unavoidable. And as obstacles are food and drink to savvy tantric practitioners, the tantric teachings will not only survive in this degenerate world, they will flourish.

In spite of the scandals, misunderstandings, miscommunications, shortage of facilities and outright mistakes that have been made over the years, I would say that the overall profit on Buddhadharma in the West's balance sheet stands at about 80%. This high level of success is a result of the tremendous blessings of the unequalled Vajrayana tradition, the great lineage holders and the dharmapalas. And I have

no doubt that their blessing will continue to shower down on all sentient beings everywhere.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://tricycle.org/magazine/quit-guru-yoga/>
 - 2 Charles Allen's *The Buddha and the Sahibs* tells the story of the rediscovery of Buddha's life in India during the 18th and 19th centuries.
 - 3 Carl Jung, Letters Vol. 1, page 538.
 - 4 The Śūraṅgama Sūtra, http://www.buddhasutra.com/files/Buddhist_Sutra_S.pdf
 - 5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QFFomC28s>
 - 6 *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* page 517.
 - 7a RK Sharma (1999), Indian Society, Institutions and Change, pages 28, 38–39.
 - 7b Translation by the Padmakara Translation Group.
 - 8 *Niels Bohr: The Man, His Science, & the World They Changed* (1966) by Ruth Moore, page 196.
 - 9 Wyl. *gnyis med*; Skt. *advaya*
 - 10 Wyl. *mi chad pa*
 - 11 Skt. *neyārtha*; Pal. *neyyattha*; Wyl. *drang don* literally, the meaning that requires drawing out; implied and indirect teachings. The *Oxford Dictionary Definition* defines 'expedient' as "a means of attaining an end, especially one that is convenient but possibly improper or immoral."
 - 12 Skt. *nītārtha*; Pali *nītattha*; Wyl. *nges don*
 - 13 This verse appears in several texts, including the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra*, the *Sutra of Individual Liberation*, and the *Dhammapada XI, Buddhavagga*, verse 183.
 - 14 In India, eunuchs, intersex people, and transgender people are often referred to as 'hijra', although members of the hijra community usually prefer to call themselves Kinnar or Kinner, after the mythological beings who were exceptionally gifted singers and dancers.
 - 15 *Pramāṇa* is a Sanskrit term, the primary meaning and most common translation of which is 'valid cognition', meaning the correct knowledge of a particular object. The term is also used to refer to the corpus of Buddhist teachings on epistemology (the science of cognition, i.e. how we know things) and ontology (which investigates the nature of existence), as these two are inextricably linked in Buddhism. The pioneers of these teachings are the Indian masters Dignaga and Dharmakirti. *Pramana* is taught in all shedras since it is the basis for debate, an important learning tool in traditional monastic universities. In this context, the term is sometimes translated as 'Buddhist logic'.
- Source: www.rigpawiki.org

- 16 Skt. *tathāgatagarbha*
- 17 from the *Heart Sutra*
- 18 Wyl. *ye shes 'chol ba*
- 19 <https://secularbuddhistnetwork.org/coming-out-as-a-secular-buddhist/>
- 20 The four kinds of teacher or lama are: 1. the individual teacher who is the holder of the lineage; 2. the teacher which is the word of the buddhas; 3. the symbolic teacher of all appearances; 4. the absolute teacher, which is rigpa, the true nature of mind. *Source: rigpawiki*
- 21 *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Patrul Rinpoche, translation Padmakara Translation Group, page 143.
- 22 This story appears in the *Verses of the Elder Nuns (Therīgāthā)* which is part of the *Sutta Pitaka*.