

Not for Happiness

A Guide to the So-Called Preliminary Practices

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Abhisheka and the Four Empowerments in Guru Yoga

Abhisheka: An Introduction to Buddhanature

Followers of the bodhisattvayana are usually introduced to buddhanature gradually through philosophical and contemplative analysis, but it is an approach that only provides a partial glimpse of buddhanature. To discover it fully, the dharma, and particularly the six paramitas or ten paramitas, must be contemplated and practiced for three countless aeons. Students of the vajrayana, on the other hand, are introduced to buddhanature immediately and offered a path and method through which it is possible to discover buddhanature in one practice session. This method is sometimes known as the "first door to the tantric path," but more commonly, "abhisheka."

While the methods used by these two vehicles for introducing students to their buddhanature are different, it is a trap to assume either that one method is better than the other, or one is good and the other bad. The main difference between them is that while the bodhisattvayana teachings put the emphasis squarely on the mind, the vajrayana is also concerned with body and speech, which is why vajrayana practitioners invoke buddhanature through abhisheka. The manifestation of "body, speech and mind" used will have a name, perhaps Tara or Manjushri or Avalokiteshvara, so in a way, it's as if the abhisheka itself is telling you that you have buddhanature.

Later, once your devotion has generated enough merit, your guru will introduce you to your buddhanature, but whether you recognize it or not will depend on the karmic connection between yourself as the receiver of the abhisheka and the guru who bestows it. So, ideally, those who receive abhisheka should feel steadfast trust in the person giving it, as well as the path itself – but this kind of devotion is not easy to generate.

What Does *Abhisheka* Mean?

Sanskrit is an extremely rich language. Each word is finely nuanced with many levels of meaning and therefore open to a variety of interpretations. *Abhisheka* is a Sanskrit term, and its two fundamental meanings have been translated into Tibetan as *torwa* and *lugpa*. *Torwa* is usually translated as "dismantling" and refers to the cocoon of ignorance in which we are wrapped and that needs to be dismantled; and *lugpa* is translated as "pouring" – as in "pouring blessings" – and more obliquely, as "discovering our buddhanature." However, as we try to understand the full implications of this word, such translations can be misleading – particularly "pouring," which is so closely connected with the idea of receiving an empowerment.

The most common description of abhisheka is that it is a transfer of power during a ceremony to give recipients the authorization to hear, study and practice the teachings of the vajrayana; we therefore "receive an empowerment." But the problem is that receiving an empowerment suggests someone is giving us a power we previously lacked, in the same way the Queen Elizabeth invests a subject with the title "Knight of the Realm," and is a long way away from the true spirit of tantric initiation.

During an initiation we are introduced to an aspect of ourselves that already exists within us but that we have yet to recognize, and it is the activation of this recognition that we call "empowerment" or "initiation." This is the real meaning of abhisheka.

Abhisheka: The Theory

According to the highest yoga tantra, there are four main kinds of abhisheka (plus a number of other kinds, each of which can be subdivided many times). Each abhisheka is tailored to dismantle one of the four kinds of ignorance or defilement:

1. the defilement of the nadi, veins or channels;
2. the defilement of prana, speech or wind-energy;
3. the defilement of bindu, which is, more or less, a defilement of mind; and
4. the defilement of the residue of the first three combined (something like "alaya"), sometimes described as the defilement of "the ground of everything."

Ritual Implements

Abhisheka almost always involves the use of ritual objects, implements and substances to symbolize profound spiritual transformation. The master who bestows the empowerment, or "initiation," first places a vase on the head of each initiate, then pours a drop of saffron water (the first initiation substance) into their hands. saying, "Drink this saffron water." Next he gives them a spoonful of liquid from the kapala filled with nectar, or *amrita* in Sanskrit (the second initiation substance), which is considered in tantra to be a mixture of the essences of the father and mother consort. The ritual substance used in the third initiation is related to the consort, which these days is usually the picture of a dakini of some sort. And lastly, the substance used by Nyingmapas and Kagyupas in the fourth or "word" initiation (which is not always necessary) is crystal to symbolize the nature of mind.

Each section of the abhisheka can be performed very elaborately or very simply and all kinds of substances, mantras, mudras and samadhi can be employed.

Water as a Tantric Substance

The Buddhist teachings originated in India, where for millennia it has been customary to purify the body with water. It is a custom that can easily translate into today's world where we, too, habitually associate washing in water with cleansing and purification. It is relatively easy, therefore, to appreciate that when we wash, we are, at the very least, not accumulating more dirt.

Ordinary, everyday water is commonly used as an exotic tantric substance, for many reasons. First and foremost, ordinary human habits are routinely incorporated into the vajrayana path. In fact, the entire vajrayana path is made up of skilful methods that reflect our habits and daily routines. For example, using water to wash a T-shirt is an extremely well-established habit, and no one would even consider using mud from the garden.

However, the vajrayana teachings also point out that what we call "water" manifests in all sorts of ways. Few of us would hesitate to wash with water from a tap or sink, but would shrink from washing in water drawn from the toilet. Of course in places like Singapore, techniques are being developed to recycle water used to flush toilets with all the other water used, and when we see it spurting from a showerhead, we forget its history completely, because now it is water for washing our bodies. Similarly, as soon as water is poured into an offering bowl, it immediately becomes offering water. So, while the generic term for all colourless liquid made up of one atom of oxygen and two of hydrogen is "water," when associated with other objects and situations, our perception of it changes: water with bubbles is drinking water, water in a bath is person-washing water, water in an old iron tub in the garden is dog-washing water, the water we put into our car

radiators becomes a cooling system and water in a pool is for swimming in. This can be taken to extremes, for example in the world of bottled water there is a brand from Japan that costs more than a hundred U.S. dollars for a 200ml bottle!

As we habitually transform water in all these ways, and the logic that insists this water is "pure" and that water "ordinary" is the same one we use to discern between drinking water and toilet-flushing water, why not use it as a tantric substance? This is why water is used as an offering substance during an abhisheka, and at times each and every drop is considered to be the mandala of the principal deity. Alcohol and soma are also used, and all these offerings are visualised as having different functions.

The Practice: Self-Empowerment

Obviously, we don't need to prepare all the ritual substances for our daily practice. In fact, to take self-initiation through meditation and visualisation practices is equally, if not more powerful, than during complicated rituals.

The four abhishekas are usually found at the end of the guru yoga practice, and the more often you receive them, the better. So you might consider repeating the abhisheka visualisations and recitations after each mala of mantras.

You might like to receive all four abhishekas one after another within the space of one practice session, or concentrate on each initiation for a set period of time (one month, or a year, for example) before moving on to the next. So, during the first year of guru yoga practice you could visualise the white light emanating from the guru's forehead, and during the second, the red light emanating from his throat, and so on. If you decide to practice in this way, do not forget to complete the rest of the abhishekas, which you can abbreviate if you are pushed for time.

1. The Vase Abhisheka

Visualise a white letter OM at the guru's forehead. Don't worry if you find it hard to see a clear image of this letter. Just imagine an intense and vivid, brilliant white light emanating from the guru's forehead that then dissolves into yours – it's similar to the visualisation in Vajrasattva practice. The white light cleanses your defilements, specifically those of the nadis (subtle channels) and five chakras (energy centres), as well as all the negative activities committed by your body. Then, consider the guru's body and your body become inseparable, which is just another way of saying that your body becomes an "indestructible vajra body."

You have now received the vase abhisheka, the door of developing meditation (utpattikrama) has been opened for you, and as the white light fills your body, the seed of the nirmanakaya has been planted in you.

2. The Secret Abhisheka

Visualise a red letter AH at the guru's throat from which brilliant rays of red light stream out and dissolve into your throat, cleansing the defiled activities of your speech and the obscurations to your prana (inner air). As the red light dissolves into you, consider your speech becomes inseparable from that of the guru ("vajra speech").

You have now received the secret abhisheka, the door to completion meditation (sambhognakrama) has been opened, and the seed of the sambhogakaya has been planted in you.

3. The Wisdom Abhisheka

Visualise a blue letter HUM in the centre of the guru's heart from which emanates dazzling blue light that dissolves into your heart centre, expelling all the defilements of mind and cleansing all obscurations of bindu (energy). Your mind is inseparable from the guru's mind ("vajra mind").

You have now received the wisdom abhisheka, the door to trekchö (the first of the two formless completion meditation practices) has been opened, and the seed of the dharmakaya has been planted in your mind.

4. The Word Abhisheka

Visualise another blue letter HUM at the guru's heart from which streams more blue light that dissolves into your forehead, throat, heart and entire body, dispelling all your defilements, the residue of your defilements and any remaining habitual patterns. You receive the blessings of the guru's body, speech and mind, and your body, speech and mind are inseparable from the guru's ("vajra wisdom").

You have now received the word abhisheka, which has destroyed the alaya and with it all trace of "mind." The door to self-arising wisdom has been opened and the seed of the svabhavikakaya has been planted in you.

Theoretically, in this final abhisheka we destroy the root of all defilements and receive the blessings of the guru's body, speech and mind by visualizing more blue light radiating from the letter HUM at the guru's heart centre.

If the ngöndro practice you follow contains slightly different details, don't worry, just follow your text.

How can you tell whether or not you have received the abhisheka? We tend to imagine we have received the abhisheka once we have been through the ritual. To sip blessed water, and so on, may be enough from a symbolic point of view, but in reality there is much more to it. As Tsele Natsok Rangdröl said, if you experience phenomena (the outer container and the inner contents) as "ordinary," you have not received the vase abhisheka; if you fail to experience all sound as mantra, you have not received the secret abhisheka; if you do not experience all mental factors and discursive thoughts as wisdom, you have not received the wisdom abhisheka; and if you have not understood everything as the dharmakaya, you have not received the word abhisheka.

Recognizing the Nature of Mind

At the end of the fourth abhisheka, having united your mind with that of the guru, you have a great opportunity to practice the technique of uncovering the nature of your mind and stabilizing that recognition, which is the only way to attain enlightenment swiftly and, according to Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, is the quickest method for recognizing the nature of mind. Gaze continuously at the union of clarity and emptiness as it always has been, without separating from yourself for a moment, and remain undistracted in that recognition. Not one sentient being, he said, has ever been separate from the nature of mind for the briefest instant, but as we are not aware of it, we chase after all manner of delusions. So, arouse compassion and aspire, "May all sentient beings understand the absolute truth that the 'awareness-emptiness uncontrived mind' *is* the absolute dharmakaya and is never, ever separate from any of us." Pray to the nature of mind, rely on it exclusively and long to realise it.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche also said, if you pray from the bottom of your heart to the affectionate mother, Yeshe Tsogyal, there is no doubt that she will embrace you with her compassion and be inseparable from you in this life, the next life and as you pass through the bardos. So, when you receive teachings and abhishekas, consider you are receiving them from the mother, Yeshe Tsogyal.

Utpattikrama and Sampannakrama

Although this text is mostly made up of suggestions about how to practice ngöndro, you might find a little information about utpattikrama and sampannakrama helpful. It may even act as an appetizer for those students who find themselves inspired by this kind of practice.

The vajrayana teaches two main kinds of meditation practice: creation, or development, meditation (utpattikrama); and completion meditation (sampannakrama). Both meditations reflect the fact that all phenomena have a beginning and an ending, an arising and a cessation, a birth and a death. To purify the beginning we apply utpattikrama, and to purify the end we apply sampannakrama. The purpose behind these two stages of meditation is immense and far-reaching. Although this may be rather a gross generalization, the purpose of creation meditation is to realise the essence of all appearance and existence, and the purpose of completion meditation is to realise the essence of emptiness, shunyata.

Ordinarily, the terms *appearance* and *emptiness* give the impression that there are two separate entities, but in vajrayana Buddhism they are not separate. The separation of "appearance" from "emptiness" constitutes "fundamental ignorance," and so to unite these two, the vajrayana provides us with the techniques of creation and completion meditation. When we admire a rainbow, we are aware, to a certain extent, that even though it appears to be very beautiful, it is empty of any solid existence. On the other hand, when we look at our own flesh and bones, we lack the capacity to understand that just like the rainbow, what we see is simply the unity of appearance and emptiness.

Creation meditation involves various tantric methods, including the visualisation of oneself as a deity, a lotus, a sun and moon disc seat and the emanation and reconvergence of rays of light from the heart of the deity. The completion stage involves two kinds of meditation: the "completion meditation of form," and "formless completion meditation." The completion meditation of form includes many anuyoga practices, such as meditating on the chakras and channels, and controlling prana by consciously gathering it into the centre of the avadhuti (the central channel), as well as dream yoga, practices for the bardos and kundalini practices. These are all included in the completion meditation of form and are followed by formless completion meditation, which is the highest vipashyana practice.

Je Könchok Lhundrub said that by practicing creation meditation it is possible for practitioners to use all worldly objects as their path, and practicing completion meditation makes it possible to transform all emotions and use them as their path.

Tsok Offering

These days, although tsok offering is not really part of ngöndro, tsok practice has been adopted by many vajrayana groups as a kind of monthly feast. It is, however, much more than a great excuse for a party.

To perform a "proper" tsok is quite difficult in a number of ways. Just gathering the appropriate assembly is hard enough, but when it comes to finding the right offering substances, things get really tough.

In India, the highest and most prestigious caste is that of the Brahmans. During the time of the Buddha, as Brahmanic sensitivities dominated Indian society, meat of any kind was considered to be the worst, dirtiest and least desirable of substances. Even today, a member of a strict Brahman family would not willingly invite meat-eating, leather-wearing Westerners to a meal at his home, as his family would consider people like you and me to be little better than animals. However, the methods offered in the Buddha's highest teachings aim to counter the habitual taboos and prejudices of the Brahmans, and therefore all their taboo substances are now part of tsok feasts.

These days, bottles of champagne and the best steak are offered by many dharma students during tsoks, but making such offerings should be done with care. For those living outside a Brahmanic culture, meat and alcohol are quite normal additions to most meals, and not despised at all. So, the point of using substances that contemporary society considers unacceptable and undesirable is, therefore, entirely lost. Ideally, we should offer plates of shit, because bacteria and faeces are, to modern scientific minds, almost universally categorized as "dirty," if not downright dangerous. And technically, the point of a tsok offering is that the practitioners should have no preference about what they eat; a plate of shit and a slice of delicious cheesecake should be anticipated with exactly the same relish.

Another problem we face as modern vajrayana practitioners is that often our tsoks become extremely rowdy, wild parties. The lack of discipline exhibited by both masters and students alike has not only tarnished the reputation of an already very suspicious-looking tradition, but violates most of the vajrayana samayas of tsok.

Many students are told to offer the very best and most expensive food and drink as a way of helping us stop grasping at money. And it works, but at the same time we must not ignore nonduality. As shit and steak are, for a vajrayana practitioner, essentially the same, a tsok offering should not necessarily include only the cleanest, gourmet foods. Having said that, though, I would never advise you to offer shit in a tsok because the revulsion most of us would feel when we smelled it could result in a great deal of samaya breakage.

The elaborate method of practicing tsok might be too overwhelming for those new to ngöndro practice, so for you there is a very simple method. Simply recite whichever of the many tsok prayers you like, for example *The Shower of Blessings* by Mipham Rinpoche, over your regular meal. Or just gather a few biscuits and some fruit for the offerings, and similarly, recite a tsok prayer.