

The Dawn of Tantra

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Visualization

ON the disc of the autumn moon, clear and pure, you place a seed syllable. The cool blue rays of the seed syllable emanate immense cooling compassion that radiates beyond the limits of sky or space. It fulfills the needs and desires of sentient beings, bringing basic warmth so that confusions may be clarified. Then from the seed syllable you create a Mahavairocana Buddha, white in color, with the features of an aristocrat - an eight-year-old child with a beautiful, innocent, pure, powerful, royal gaze. He is dressed in the costume of a medieval king of India. He wears a glittering gold crown inlaid with wish-fulfilling jewels. Part of his long black hair floats over his shoulders and back; the rest is made into a topknot surmounted by a glittering blue diamond. He is seated crosslegged on the lunar disc with his hands in the meditation mudra holding a vajra carved from pure white crystal.

Now what are we going to do with *that*?

The picture is uncomplicated; at the same time it is immensely rich. There is a sense of dignity and also a sense of infancy. There is a purity that is irritatingly pure, irritatingly cool. As we follow the description of Mahavairocana, perhaps his presence seems real in our minds. Such a being could actually exist: a royal prince, eight years of age, who was born from a seed syllable. One feels good just to think about such a being.

Mahavairocana is the central symbol in the first tantric yana, the *kriyayogayana*. He evokes the basic principle of kriyayoga - immaculateness, purity. He is visualized by the practitioner as part of his meditation.

In the *kriyayogayana*, since one has already discovered the transmutation of energy, discovered all-pervading delight, there is no room for impurity, no room for darkness. The reason is that there is no doubt. The rugged, confused, unclean, impure elements of the struggle with *samsara* have been left far behind. Finally we are able to associate with that which is pure, clean, perfect, absolutely immaculate. At last we have managed to actualize *tathagatagarbha*, Buddha-nature. We have managed to visualize, to actualize, to formulate a most immaculate, pure, clean, beautiful, white, spotless principle.

There is a widespread misunderstanding of tantra, which sees tantra as pop art. People have heard that the tantric approach is to accept *samsara* fully. The idea has developed that therefore we are declaring everything - sexuality, aggression, ignorance - as legitimate and pure; that we accept the crudeness as a big joke. "The crudeness is the fun." Therefore, the idea runs, we can jump into tantra by being crude and dirty: "Since we have to live with the crudeness, let's consider it beautiful." But visualizing Mahavairocana is far different from the gesture of stealing a "Rue Royale" streetsign in Paris and sticking it up on our wall. The whole idea of tantra is very different from joining a club formed by tantric teachers in which it has been agreed to regard the mess of confusion as something liveable and workable, to pretend that our pile of shit is nice, fresh, earthy soil that we are sitting on. This is a great misunderstanding.

The misunderstanding seems to be that tantra comes into being out of some kind of desperation; that since we cannot handle the confusion, we accept the convention of tantra as a saving grace. Then the shit of our confusion becomes pictorial, artistic - pop art. Supposedly tantra acknowledges this view eagerly and formally. But there is something very crude about this idea. If tantra merely acknowledged that *samsara* had to be put up with, without seeing the absolute purity and cleanness of it, tantra would be just another form of depression, and devoid of compassion.

Actually, far from beginning by exalting crudeness, the

introduction to tantra is fantastically precise and pure, clean and artful. It could be said that the kriyayogayana is to the Vajrayana what the Yogacara approach, which underlies Zen, is to the Mahayana. There is a pronounced artful quality, a great appreciation of purity and cleanness.

Just as bodhisattvas embodying the magnificent vision of the Mahayana are good citizens, tantric yogis are also extremely good citizens. Tantric practitioners are the good mechanics in garages, who know the infinite details of the functioning of machines with clean and precise mind. Tantric practitioners are good artists, who paint good pictures that do not try to con one. Tantric practitioners are good lovers, who do not take advantage of their partners' energy and emotion, but make love precisely, accurately, purely. Tantric practitioners are good musicians, who do not fool around banging away at random, but play precisely, musically. Tantra is by no means to be associated with marginal lifestyles, Bohemianism, where one is intensely critical of convention and takes pride in being rugged and dirty.

The right understanding of tantra is crucial for the practice of visualization. One Nyingma teacher said that undertaking the practice of visualization is like going to bed with a pregnant tigress. She might get hungry in the middle of the night and decide to eat you. On the other hand, she might begin to nurse you, creating the furry warmth and texture of basic space. Certainly practicing visualization without the proper understanding is extremely destructive. A kriyayoga text, the *Vajramala*, says that the practitioner of wrong visualization, instead of attaining the complete openness of Vajrasattva attains, the complete egohood of Rudra, the ultimate spiritual ape. The tantric scriptures abound with warnings about wrong visualization.

Generally, wrong visualization takes the form of intensifying ordinary mental objects. One creates an image out of wishful thinking. For example, in the middle of one's meditation practice a sexual fantasy arises and one decides to carry it out in complete detail - stage one, stage two, stage three and so on. This same approach can apply to visualizations of tantric material. Even in visualizing Mahavairocana, a child sitting on a lunar disc, one might be recreating one's ego projection. The result is the ultimate ape: "I am Mahavairocana, I am one with

him; let no one challenge this." There is a sense of the beast, a great powerful chest, the cosmic gorilla.

There is a precise attitude and understanding of visualization corresponding to each level of tantra - kriyayoga, upayoga, yoga, mahayoga, anuyoga and maha ati. The student's understanding evolves organically from one stage of tantra to the next. But for the student to arrive at any proper understanding of visualization at all, it is absolutely necessary to have gone through all the previous stages of the path. He has to have developed the Hinayana understanding of suffering, impermanence and egolessness and insight into the structure of ego. He must have attained the understanding on the Mahayana level of the shunyata principle and its application in the paramitas, the six transcendental actions of the bodhisattva. It is not necessary to have completely mastered all of these experiences, but the student must have had some glimpse of their significance. He has to have used up his mental gossip or at least taken out a corner of it. There must be some sense of having trod on the path of Hinayana and Mahayana before embarking on the Tantrayana.

If one has done this, then rather than coming as a reinforcement of ego's deception, visualization will be inspired by a sense of hopelessness or, to say the same thing, egolessness. One can no longer deceive oneself. There is the despair of having lost one's territory; the carpet has been pulled out from under one's feet. One is suspended in nowhere or able at least to flash his non-existence, his egolessness. Only then can one visualize. This is extremely important.

According to tradition, one of the principal masters who brought the Vajrayana teachings to Tibet from India was Atisha Dipankara. Atisha prepared the ground for Vajrayana by teaching surrendering. In fact he was known as the "refuge" teacher because of the extent to which he emphasized taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha is a process of surrendering. Tremendous emphasis was laid by Atisha on surrendering, giving, opening, not holding onto something.

People who live in New York City have very vivid and definite impressions of that city - the yellow cabs, the police

cars, the street scene. Imagine, for example, trying to convey this to a Tibetan living in Lhasa. If you wanted to teach him about America starting with New York, you could say: "New York City goes like this. There are streets, skyscrapers, yellow cabs. Visualize all that. Pretend you are in it." You could expound Newyorkcityness on and on and on, explain it in the minutest detail; but he would have tremendous difficulty visualizing it, actually having the feeling of being in New York City. He would relate to New York City as being some kind of mystery land. There would be a sense of novelty.

Teaching Americans to visualize Mahavairocana is like teaching Tibetans to visualize New York City. Americans simply have not had that kind of experience. So how is it possible to bridge such a gap? Precisely by going through the three levels of Buddhist practice. Without the basic mindfulness practices and the development of awareness, there is no way at all of beginning the visualization practice of tantra.

It is through these fundamental practices that one can begin to see why such emphasis is placed on purity and cleanness, on the immaculate quality of the Mahavairocana visualization. Because of those preparatory experiences, the infant born from a seed syllable, sitting on the lunar disc, becomes impressive, highly impressive. This sambhogakaya Buddha becomes beautiful because one has developed the possibility of unbiased experience. One can relate directly, egolessly; then a principle arising out of this unbiased level of experience, Mahavairocana, for example, becomes fantastically expressive. This is complete purity, purity that never had to be washed. If one tried to produce this kind of purity by using Ajax to clean up one's dirty image, one would simply create a further mess. The purity of tantric experience is real beyond question. The practitioner does not have to think twice: "Is this really happening or am I imagining it." The experience beggars uncertainty.

Visualization is a prominent part of tantric practice. One identifies with various iconographical figures - sambhogakaya Buddhas, herukas, dakinis. This is done to develop vajra pride. Vajra pride is different from ordinary stupid pride. It is enlightened pride. You *do* have the potentialities of the deity; you are him already. The magic is not particularly in the

visualization, but there is magic in your pride, your inspiration. You *are* Mahavairocana. You are absolutely clean, immaculate and pure. Therefore you can identify with your *own* purity, your purity rather than that of an external god who is pure, rather than some kind of foreign element coming into you. You are awakening yourself.

So tantra is not magic in the sense of conjuring or involving oneself in a myth. Tantra is the highest level of a process of personal evolution. It is the ultimate development of the logic that runs through the entire Buddhist path.

Kriyayoga places particular emphasis on mudras, or hand gestures, as well as on visualization. In these practices you are, in a sense, competing with the Buddhas and deities. You are making their hand gestures, behaving like them, trying to become one. But again, it is not really a question of trying, but of thinking that you *are* one. Vajra pride is the pride that you *are* Buddha.

That one *is* the deities, one *is* the Buddhas is a big point for beginners in tantra. The problem may arise that one does not think one actually is. So one thinks: "I am supposed to think that I am Samantabhadra Buddha, I am Mahavairocana. Therefore I had better crank myself into that role." This remote approach, instead of the directness of actually *being* that deity, is considered cowardice or stupidity. In order to develop vajra pride, one has to relate directly to the pain of situations, in this case the pain of actually being the deity, and see the value of it. Then that pride has something valid to be proud of.

It is in connection with the development of vajra pride that kriyayoga makes its strong emphasis on purity. You are spotlessly pure because there is no room for doubt. This is associated with the view of the phenomenal world in mahamudra. The phenomenal world is seen as completely colorful, precisely beautiful *as it is*, beyond acceptance and rejection, without any problems. You have seen things in this way because you have already cut through your conceptualized notion of a self and you have seen through its projections. Since that is the case, there is nothing that could come up that could be an obstacle in your handling the situation. It is totally precise and clear. *As it is*.