

*Vajradhara and consort. The personification of Shakyamuni Buddha teaching tantra.  
Symbol of the Absolute in its polarity aspect.  
DRAWING BY GLEN EDDY.*

## Tantra

AFTER THE BODHISATVA has cut through fixed concepts with the sword of prajna, he comes to the understanding that "form is form, emptiness is emptiness." At this point he is able to deal with situations with tremendous clarity and skill. As he journeys still further along the bodhisatva path, prajna and compassion deepen and he experiences greater awareness of intelligence and space and greater awareness of peace. Peace in this sense is indestructible, tremendously powerful. We cannot be truly peaceful unless we have the invincible quality of peace within us; a feeble or temporary peacefulness could always be disturbed. If we try to be kind and peaceful in a naive way, encountering a different or unexpected situation might interfere with our awareness of peace because that peace has no strength in it, has no character. So peace must be stable, deep-rooted, and solid. It must have the quality of earth. If we have power in ego's sense, we tend to exert that power and use it as our tool to undermine others. But as bodhisatvas we do not use power to undermine people; we simply remain peaceful.

Finally we reach the tenth and last stage of the bodhisatva path: the death of shunyata and the birth into "luminosity." Shunyata as an experience falls away, exposing the luminous quality of form. Prajna transforms into jnana or "wisdom." But wisdom is still experienced as an external discovery. The powerful jolt of the vajra-like samadhi is necessary to bring the bodhisatva into the state of *being* wisdom rather than *knowing* wisdom. This is the moment of bodhi or "awake," the entrance into tantra. In the awakened state the colorful, luminous qualities of the energies become still more vivid.

If we see a red flower, we not only see it in the absence of ego's

complexity, in the absence of preconceived names and forms, but we also see the brilliance of that flower. If the filter of confusion between us and the flower is suddenly removed, automatically the air becomes quite clear and vision is very precise and vivid.

While the basic teaching of mahayana buddhism is concerned with developing prajna, transcendental knowledge, the basic teaching of tantra is connected with working with energy. Energy is described in the *Kriyayoga Tantra* of Vajramala as "that which abides in the heart of all beings, self-existing simplicity, that which sustains wisdom. This indestructible essence is the energy of great joy; it is all-pervasive, like space. This is the dharma body of nondwelling." According to this tantra, "This energy is the sustainer of the primordial intelligence which perceives the phenomenal world. This energy gives impetus to both the enlightened and the confused states of mind. It is indestructible in the sense of being constantly ongoing. It is the driving force of emotion and thought in the confused state, and of compassion and wisdom in the enlightened state."

In order to work with this energy the yogi must begin with the surrendering process and then work on the shunyata principle of seeing beyond conceptualization. He must penetrate through confusion, seeing that "form is form and emptiness is empty," until finally he even cuts through dwelling upon the shunyata experience and begins to see the luminosity of form, the vivid, precise, colorful aspect of things. At this point whatever is experienced in everyday life through sense perception is a naked experience, because it is direct. There is no veil between him and "that." If a yogi works with energy without having gone through the shunyata experience, then it may be dangerous and destructive. For example, the practice of some physical yoga exercises which stimulate one's energy could awaken the energies of passion, hatred, pride, and other emotions to the extent that one would not know how to express them. The scriptures describe a yogi who is completely intoxicated with his energy as being like a drunken elephant who runs rampant without considering where he is going.

Tantric teaching surpasses the "looking beyond" bias of the transcendental attitude that "form is form." When we speak of transcendence in the mahayana tradition, we mean transcendence of ego. In the tantric tradition we do not speak of going beyond ego at all: it is too dualistic an attitude. Tantra is much more precise than that. It is not a question of "getting there" or "being there"; the tantric tradition speaks of being

here. It speaks of transmutation and the analogy of alchemistic practice is used a great deal. For example, the existence of lead is not rejected but lead is transmuted into gold. You do not have to change its metallic quality at all; you must simply transmute it.

Tantra is synonymous with dharma, the path, "The function of tantric practice is to transmute ego, enabling the primordial intelligence to shine through. The word *tantra* means "continuity." It is like the thread which strings beads together. The thread is the path. The beads are the working basis of tantric practice: that is, the five skandas or the five constituents of ego as well as the primordial potential of the Buddha within oneself, the primordial intelligence.

Tantric wisdom brings nirvana into samsara. This may sound rather shocking. Before reaching the level of tantra, you try to abandon samsara and strive to achieve nirvana. But eventually you must realize the futility of striving and then become completely one with nirvana. In order to really capture the energy of nirvana and become one with it you need a partnership with the ordinary world. Therefore the term "ordinary wisdom," *thund gyi shepa*, is used a great deal in the tantric tradition. It is the completely ordinary version of "form is form, emptiness is empty"; it is what is. One cannot reject the physical existence of the world as being something bad and associated with samsara. You can only understand the essence of nirvana by looking into the essence of samsara. Thus the path involves something more than simply going beyond duality, something more than mere nondualistic understanding. You are able to see the "nondualisticness," so to speak, the "isness" quality of nonduality, not see beyond the negation aspect of shunyata, the negation of duality. Therefore, the term *shunyata* is not used very much in tantra. In tantric tradition *tathata*, "what is," is used, rather than shunyata or "emptiness." The word *ösel* (Tibetan) or *prabhasvara* (Sanskrit), which means "luminous," is also used a lot rather than *shunyata*. You find this reference to the tantric tradition in the Buddha's last turning of the wheel of dharma: instead of saying, "Form is empty, emptiness is form," and so on, he says that form is luminous. Luminosity or *prabhasvara* is connected with *madhankha*, the "great joy" or "bliss," the full realization that "emptiness is emptiness." It is not empty simply because form is also form.

The dynamic quality of energy is not expressed enough in the doctrine of shunyata because the whole discovery of shunyata derives its meaning relative to samsaric mind. Shunyata offers an *alternative* to samsara and

so the teaching of shunyata is directed toward the samsaric mentality. Even if this teaching goes beyond saying that "form is empty and emptiness is form" to say that "emptiness is no other than form" and "form is no other than emptiness," still it does not go so far as to say that form has this energy and emptiness has this energy. In the vajrayana or tantric teaching the principle of energy plays a very important part.

The teaching must connect with the day-to-day lives of its practitioners. We are confronted with the thoughts, emotions, and energies of our relationships with other people and the world. How are we going to relate our understanding of shunyata to everyday events unless we recognize the energy aspect of life? If we cannot dance with life's energies, we will not be able to use our experience of shunyata to unite samsara and nirvana. Tantra teaches not to suppress or destroy energy but to transmute it; in other words, go with the pattern of energy. When we find balance going with the energy, we begin to get acquainted with it. We begin to find the right path with the right direction. This does not mean that a person has to become a drunken elephant, a wild yogi in the pejorative sense.

A perfect example of going with energy, of the positive wild yogi quality, was the actual transmission of enlightenment from Tilopa to Naropa. Tilopa removed his sandal and slapped Naropa in the face. He used the situation of the moment, Naropa's energy of curiosity and seeking, transmuting it into the awakened state. Naropa had tremendous energy and intelligence, but his energy was not related to Tilopa's understanding, to his openness of mind, which was another kind of energy. In order to penetrate this barrier a sudden jolt was needed, a shock which was not artificial. It is like a crooked building which is just about to fall down but is straightened suddenly, accidentally, by an earthquake. Natural circumstances are used to restore the original state of openness. When one goes with the pattern of energy, then experience becomes very creative. The energy of wisdom and compassion is continually operating in a precise and accurate way.

As the yogi becomes more sensitive to the patterns and qualities of energy, he sees more clearly the meaning or symbolism in life experiences. The first half of tantric practice, the lower tantra, is called mahamudra, which means "great symbol." Symbol, in this sense, is not a "sign" representing some philosophical or religious principle; it is the demonstration of the living qualities of what is. For instance, in the direct perception of a flower, the perception of naked insight, unclothed and unmasked, the

color of the flower conveys a message over and beyond the simple perception of color. There is great meaning in this color, which is communicated in a powerful, almost overwhelming way. Conceptualized mind is not involved in the perception and so we are able to see with great precision, as though a veil had been removed from before our eyes.

Or if we hold a piece of rock in our hands with that clarity of perception which is the direct contact of naked insight, we not only feel the solidity of that one rock, but we also begin to perceive the spiritual implications of it; we experience it as an absolute expression of the solidity and majesty of earth. In fact we could be holding Mount Everest in our hands, as far as the recognition of fundamental solidity is concerned. That small rock represents every aspect of solidity. I do not mean this in the physical sense alone; but I am speaking of solidity in the spiritual sense, the solidity of peace and energy, indestructible energy. The yogi feels the solidity and forbearance of earth—whatever you plant or bury in it, the earth never reacts against it. In this rock he is aware of the enlightened wisdom of equanimity as well as the samsaric quality of ego-pride which wants to build a high pyramid or monument to its own existence. Every situation we encounter has this vivid connection with our state of being. It is interesting to note that in the tantric iconography a number of symbolic figures are shown holding a mountain in one hand, which represents exactly what we have been discussing: solid peace, solid compassion, solid wisdom which cannot be influenced by the frivolity of ego.

Every texture we perceive has some spiritual implication automatically, and we begin to realize the tremendous energy contained within this discovery and understanding. The mediator develops new depths of insight through direct communication with the reality of the phenomenal world. He is able to see not only the absence of complexity, the absence of duality, but the *stoneness* of stone and the *waterness* of water. He sees things precisely as they are, not merely in the physical sense, but with awareness of their spiritual significance. Everything he sees is an expression of spiritual discovery. There is a vast understanding of symbolism and a vast understanding of energy. Whatever the situation, he no longer has to force results. Life flows around him. This is the basic mandala principle. The mandala is generally depicted as a circle which revolves around a center, which signifies that everything around you becomes part of your awareness, the whole sphere expressing the vivid reality of life. The only way to experience things truly, fully, and properly

is through the practice of meditation, creating a direct link with nature, with life, with all situations. When we speak of being highly developed spiritually, this does not mean that we float in the air. In fact, the higher we go, the more we come down to earth.

It is important to remember that the practice of meditation begins with the penetration of the neurotic thought pattern which is the fringe of ego. As we proceed further, we see through not only the complexity of the thought processes but also the heavy "meaningfulness" of concepts expressed in names and theories. Then at last we create some space between *this* and *that*, which liberates us tremendously. Having created space, we then go on to the vajrayana practice of creating a direct link with life experience. These three steps are, in essence, the three yantras: the hinayana, the vehicle of method; the mahayana, the vehicle of shunyata or space; and the vajrayana or tantra, the vehicle of direct energy.

In the tantric tradition energy is categorized in five basic qualities or buddha families: vajra, ratna, padma, karuna, and buddha. Each buddha family has an emotion associated with it which is transmuted into a particular "wisdom" or aspect of the awakened state of mind. The buddha families are also associated with colors, elements, landscapes, directions, seasons, with any aspect of the phenomenal world.

Vajra is associated with anger, which is transmuted into mirrorlike wisdom. We sense something beyond the cloudy, possessive, and aggressive qualities of anger and this intuitive insight enables us to automatically transmute the essence of anger into precision and openness, rather than deliberately changing it.

Vajra is also associated with the element of water. Cloudy, turbulent water symbolizes the defensive and aggressive nature of anger while clear water suggests the sharp, precise, clear reflectiveness of mirrorlike wisdom.

Vajra is the color white. Anger is the very blunt and direct experience of defending oneself; therefore it is like a sheet of white paper, very flat and opaque. But it also has the potential of luminosity, of the brilliance of reflection which is mirrorlike wisdom.

Vajra is connected with the east, the dawn, winter. It is a winter morning, crystal clear, icicles sharp and glittering. The landscape is not empty or desolate but is full of all sorts of thought-provoking sharpness. There are many things to intrigue the observer. For example, the ground, trees, plants all have their own way of freezing. Different trees

have different ways of carrying snow and different ways of relating to temperature.

Vajra deals with objects in terms of their textures and their relations to each other. Everything is analyzed in its own terms. The intelligence of vajra never leaves any unexplored areas or hidden corners. It is like water flowing over a flat surface, completely covering the surface but remaining transparent.

Ratna is associated with pride and earth—solidity, mountains, hills, pyramids, buildings. "I am completely secure. I am what I am." It is a very proud way of looking at oneself. This means that one is afraid to loosen up, is continually piling up defenses, building a fortress. Equally, ratna is the wisdom of equanimity, which is all-pervading. Whether you construct buildings out of earth or whether you simply leave the earth as it is, it is the same thing. The earth remains as it is. You do not feel defeated or threatened at all. If you are a proud person, you feel yourself constantly challenged by the possibility of failure and defeat. In the enlightened mind the anxiety of maintaining oneself is transmuted into equanimity. There is still awareness of the solidity and stability of earth but there is no fear of losing it. Everything is open, safe, and dignified; there is nothing to fear.

Ratna is related to the south and autumn, fertility, richness in the sense of continual generosity. When fruit is ripe, it automatically falls to the ground, asking to be eaten up. Ratna has this kind of giving away quality. It is luscious and open with the quality of midmorning. It is yellow, connected with the sun's rays. Where vajra is associated with crystal, ratna is gold, amber, saffron. It has a sense of depth, real earthiness rather than texture, whereas vajra is purely texture, a crispy quality rather than fundamental depth. Ratna is so ripe and earthy, it is like a pyramitic tree which falls to the ground and begins to rot and grow mushrooms all over it and is enriched by the weeds growing around it. It is a log in which animals might nest. Its color begins to turn to yellow and its bark to peel off, revealing an interior which is very rich and very solid. If you were to attempt to remove this log in order to use it as part of a garden arrangement, it would be impossible because it would crumble and fall apart. It would be too heavy to carry anyway.

Padma is connected with passion, a grasping quality, a desire to possess. In the background of passion there is the instinct toward union, wanting to be completely one with something. But passion has an hysterical quality, a neurotic quality which ignores the real state of being

united and instead wants to possess in order to *become* united. Passion defeats its own purpose automatically. In the case of discriminating awareness, which is the wisdom aspect of passion, one sees the quality of "this" and "that" precisely and sharply. In other words, communication takes place. If you are going to communicate with someone, you must respect the existence of the other person as well as your process of communication. Discriminating awareness wisdom recognizes the fact of union, which is quite different from dualistically separating "that" from "this" in order to maintain oneself. The consuming quality of burning fire, desire, is transmuted into the wisdom of binding together through communication. You may be completely caught up with possessiveness in a spiritual or material sense. You may want something more than you can have. You may be so fascinated by the exotic qualities of the thing you want that you are blind to the world around you. You are completely wrapped up in desire, which produces an automatic sort of stupidity and ignorance. This ignorance in desire is transcended in discriminating awareness wisdom.

Padma is linked with the west and the color red. Red stands out from any other color, is very provocative, draws you toward it. It is also connected with the element of fire. In the confused state fire does not discriminate among the things that it grasps, burns, and destroys. In the awake state the heat of passion is transmuted into the warmth of compassion.

Padma is related to early spring. The harshness of winter is just about to soften with the promise of summer. Ice begins to melt, snowflakes become soggy. Padma is very much connected with facade; it has no feeling of solidity or texture; it is purely concerned with colors, the glamorous qualities, sunset. The visual quality of the surface is more important than its being. So padma is involved with art rather than science or practicality.

Padma is a reasonable location, a place where wildflowers grow, a perfect place to have animals roaming about, such as a highland plateau. It is a place of meadows scattered with gentle rocks suitable for young animals to play among.

Karma is associated with the emotion of jealousy, envy, and the element of wind. However, the terms "jealousy" and "envy" are not powerful and precise enough to describe the quality of karma. "Absolute paranoia" probably is a good phrase. You feel that you are not going to achieve any of your goals. You become irritated by the accomplishments

of other people. You feel left behind and cannot bear to see others surpass you. This fear, this distrust of oneself, is connected with the element of wind. Wind never blows in all directions but it blows in one direction at a time. This is the one-way view of paranoia or envy.

Karma is connected with the wisdom of all-accomplishing action. The quality of paranoia falls away but the qualities of energy, keenness to action, and openness remain. In other words, the active aspect of wind is retained so that one's activity touches everything in its path. One's action is appropriate because it does not involve self-conscious panic or paranoia anymore. It sees the possibilities inherent in situations and automatically takes the appropriate course. It fulfills the purpose.

Karma suggests summer in the north. It is the efficiency of karma which connects it with this season, for it is a summer in which all things are active, growing, fulfilling their function. Millions of interconnected actions take place: living things grow, plants, insects, animals. There are thunderstorms and hailstorms. There is the sense that you are never left to enjoy the summer because something is always moving in order to maintain itself. It is a bit like late spring, but it is more fertile because it sees that all things are fulfilled at the right moment. The color of karma is the green of vegetables and grasses, of growing energy. Whereas the karma of summer is still competing, trying to give birth, the ratna of autumn has tremendous confidence; everything has been accomplished. The mood of karma is after sunset, dusk, late day and early night.

Buddha is associated with dullness and has an all-pervading quality because it contains and goes with all the rest of the emotions. The active factor in this dullness is the action of ignoring. Ignoring does not want to see. It just ignores and overcrows itself. You are completely relaxed, completely careless. You would rather maintain your stupor than search or struggle for anything, and a slothful, stupid quality is brought to all the other emotions.

The wisdom connected with buddha is that of all-encompassing space. The all-pervading quality of dullness is kept as the foundation, but the flicker of doubt and sloth in this dullness is transformed into wisdom. This wisdom contains tremendous energy and intelligence which run right through all the other elements, colors, and emotions, which activate all the rest of the five wisdoms.

Buddha is the foundation or the "basic ground." It is the environment or oxygen which makes it possible for the other principles to function. It

has a sedate, solid quality. Ratna is very solid and earthy as well, but it is not as earthy as buddha which is dull-earthly, uninteresting-earthly. Buddha is somewhat desolate, too spacious. It is a campsite where only the stones from campfires are left. The place has a sense of having been inhabited for a long time, but at present no one is there. The inhabitants were not killed or forced to move violently; they simply left. The mood is like that of the caves where American Indians used to live. They have a feeling of the past, but at the same time there are no outstanding characteristics. The tone is very dull, quite possibly in the plains, very flat. Buddha is connected with the color blue, the cool, spacious quality of sky.

Q: How do the pictures of buddhas, yidams, wrathful gods, and other symbols fit into the Tibetan spiritual path?

A: There is a great deal of misunderstanding regarding Tibetan iconography. Perhaps we should quickly go through the structure of iconography and symbolism in tantra. There is what is called "the iconography of the guru," which is connected with the pattern of the path, with the fact that, before you start to receive any teaching, you must surrender willingly; must open yourself. In order to surrender you somehow must identify yourself completely with the fullness and richness of life. At this point surrendering is not emptying in the sense of shunyata emptiness, which is a more advanced experience. But in the early stages of the path surrender means becoming an empty vessel. It also means identification with the fullness, with the richness of the teaching. So symbolically the gurus of the lineage wear highly ornamented robes, hats, and scepters and have other ornaments which they hold in their hands.

Then there is the iconography of the yidams which is connected with tantric practice. Yidams are the different aspects of the five buddha principles of energy. They are depicted as male herukas or female dakinis and can be either wrathful or peaceful. The wrathful aspect is associated with transmutation by force, leaping into wisdom, and choiceless transmutation. It is the act of cutting through, associated with crazy wisdom. Peaceful yidams are associated with transmutation by "process"; that is, confusion is pacified and gradually worn out.

The yidams wear the costumes of raksasas, who in Indian mythology are vampires connected with Rudra, King of the Maras; the evil ones. The symbolism involved is that, when ignorance, symbolized by Rudra, has created its empire, then wisdom appears and destroys the

empire and takes the costumes of its emperor and his retinue. The yidams' costumes symbolize that they have transmuted ego into wisdom. The five-skulled crowns they wear represent the five emotions which have been transmuted into the five wisdoms. These emotions are not thrown away but are worn as ornaments. Furthermore, the trident or *trishula* which the yidams carry is ornamented with three heads: a fresh head, a dry shrunken head, and a skeleton head. The fresh head represents hot passion. The dry one represents cold anger and toughness, like tough meat. The skeleton head represents stupidity. The trishula is an ornament which symbolizes transcendence of these three impulses. In addition the trident has three points which represent the three basic principles of being: shunyata, energy, and the quality of manifestation. These are the three "bodies" of the Buddha, the three kayas: dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. All the ornaments worn by the yidams—the bone ornaments, snakes, and others—are associated with different aspects of the path. For example, they wear a garland of fifty-one skulls which represents transcendence of the fifty-one types of thought patterns discussed in the hinayana doctrine of abhidharma.

In tantric practice one identifies with a yidam of a particular buddha family corresponding to one's nature. For instance, if a yidam is associated with the ratna family, then he will be yellow in color and have symbolism characteristic of ratna. The types of mandalas given to you by your teacher depend upon the family to which you belong, whether you belong to the passionate family or the family of pride, or whether you have the quality of air or water in you. Generally one can feel that certain people have the quality of earth and solidity, and certain people have the quality of air, rushing here and there, and other people have the quality of warmth and a presence connected with fire. The mandalas are given to you so that you can identify yourself with your particular emotions which have the potential of transmuting into wisdom. Sometimes you practice the visualization of these yidams. However, when you begin working with them, you do not visualize them immediately. You begin with an awareness of shunyata and then develop the feeling of the presence of that image or form. Then you recite a mantra which has an association with this particular feeling. In order to weaken the strength of ego, one somehow must establish a link between the imaginary presence and the watcher of oneself, the ego. The mantra is the link. After the practice of mantra, you dissolve the image or the form into a certain color

of light appropriate to the specific *yidam*. Finally you end your visualization with, again, an awareness of *shunyata*. The whole idea is that these *yidams* must not be regarded as external gods who will save you, but they are expressions of your true nature. You identify yourself with the attributes and colors of particular *yidams* and feel the sound that comes from the mantra so that finally you begin to realize that your true nature is invincible. You become completely one with the *yidam*.

In *maha ati*, the highest tantra, the sense of identification falls away and one merges into one's true nature. Only the energies and colors remain. Previously you saw through forms and images and sounds, saw their empty quality. Now you see the forms, images, and sounds in their true quality. It is the idea of returning to *samsara* which is expressed in the Zen tradition by the ox-herding pictures: you have no man and no ox, and then at the end, you have return to the world.

Thirdly, there is the iconography of the "protective divinities." In the practice of identifying yourself with a particular *yidam* you have to develop an awareness which throws you back to your true nature from your confused nature. You need sudden shocks, reminders all the time, an awake quality. This awareness is represented by the protective divinities which are shown in wrathful form. It is a sudden jerk which reminds you. It is a wrathful awareness because it involves leaping. This leap needs a certain kind of energy to cut through confusion. You have to actually take the initiative to leap without any hesitation from the boundary of confusion into openness. You must really destroy hesitation. You must destroy all obstacles you meet on the path. Therefore this divinity is called protective. "Protection" does not mean securing your safety, but it signifies a reference point, a guideline which reminds you, keeps you in your place, in the open. For instance, there is a *mahakala* protective divinity called Six-Armed Mahakala who is black in color and stands on Ganesha, the elephant-headed god who here symbolizes subconscious thoughts. This subconscious gossip is an aspect of slothfulness that automatically distracts you from being aware and invites you back to being fascinated by your thoughts and emotions. It especially plays upon the survey nature of your thoughts—intellectual, domestic, emotional thoughts, whatever they may be. The mahakala brings you back to openness. The intent of the symbolism is that the mahakala overpowers subconscious gossip by standing on it. The mahakala represents the leap into penetrating awareness.

Generally, all Buddhist tantric iconography is included in these three

categories: the guru, the *yidams*, and the protective divinities. The iconography of the guru expresses the richness of the lineage. The *yidams* allow you to identify with your particular nature. Then there are the protective divinities to act as reminders to you. The *yidams* and the protective divinities are generally shown in varying intensities of wrath, depending upon the intensity of awareness needed in order for you to see your true nature.

The wrathful *yidams* are always associated with what is known in tantric terms as *vajra anger*, the anger which has the *tathata* quality; in other words, it is anger without hatred, a dynamic energy. This particular energy, whatever wisdom it may belong to, is invincible. It is completely indestructible, imperturbable, because it is not created but is discovered as an original quality. It is, therefore, not subject to birth and death. It is always depicted as angry, wrathful, and warriorlike.

Q: How does transmutation take place?

A: Transmutation takes place with the understanding of *shunyata* and then the sudden discovery of energy. You realize that you no longer have to abandon anything. You begin to see the underlying qualities of wisdom in your life situation, which means that there is a kind of leap. If you are highly involved in one emotion such as anger, then by having a sudden glimpse of openness, which is *shunyata*, you begin to see that you do not have to suppress your energy. You do not have to keep calm and suppress the energy of anger, but you can transform your aggression into dynamic energy. It is a question of how open you are, how much you are really willing to do it. If there is less fascination and satisfaction with the explosion and release of your energy, then there is more likelihood of transmuting it. Once we become involved with the fascination and satisfaction of energy, then we are unable to transmute it. You do not have to completely change yourself, but you can use part of your energy in an awakened state.

Q: What is the difference between *jnana* and *prajna*?

A: One cannot regard wisdom as an external experience. That is the difference between wisdom and knowledge, *jnana* and *prajna*. *Prajna* is knowledge in terms of relativity, and *jnana* is wisdom beyond any kind of relativity. You are completely one with wisdom; you do not regard it as something educational or something experiential.

Q: How do you transmute emotion? How do you deal with it?

A: Well, that is a very personal question rather than an intellectual one. The whole point is that we have not actually experienced our emotions, although we think we have. We have only experienced emotions in terms of me and my anger, me and my desire. This "me" is a kind of central governing structure. The emotions play the part of messengers, bureaucrats, and soldiers. Instead of experiencing emotions as being separate from you, your rather unruly employees so to speak, you must actually feel the texture and real living quality of the emotions. Expressing or acting out hatred or desire on the physical level is another way of trying to escape from your emotions, just as you do when you try to repress them. If one actually feels the living quality, the texture of the emotions as they are in their naked state, then this experience also contains ultimate truth. And automatically one begins to see the simultaneously ironical and profound aspects of the emotions, as they are. Then the process of transmutation, that is, transmuting the emotions into wisdom, takes place automatically. But, as I have said, it is a personal question; we really have to do it. Until we actually do it, no words can describe it. We have to be brave enough to actually encounter our emotions, work with them in a real sense, feel their texture, the real quality of the emotions as they are. We would discover that emotion actually does not exist as it appears, but it contains much wisdom and open space. The problem is that we never experience emotions properly. We think that fighting and killing express anger, but these are another kind of escape, a way of releasing rather than actually experiencing emotion as it is. The basic nature of the emotions has not been felt properly.

Q: When emotions are transmuted, that doesn't mean they disappear, does it?

A: Not necessarily, but they are transmuted into other forms of energy. If we are trying to be good or peaceful, trying to suppress or subdue our emotions, that is the basic twist of ego in operation. We are being aggressive toward our emotions, trying forcefully to achieve peace or goodness. Once we cease being aggressive toward our emotions, cease trying to change them, once we experience them properly, then transmutation may take place. The irritating quality of the emotions is transmuted once you experience them as they are. Transmutation does not mean that the energy quality of the emotions is eliminated; in fact it is transformed into wisdom, which is very much needed.

Q: What about sexual tantra? Is that the process of transmuting sexual energy into something else?

A: It is the same thing. When the grasping quality of passion or desire is transformed into open communication, a dance, then the relationship of two people begins to develop creatively rather than being stagnating or being irritating to them.

Q: Does this principle of transmutation apply to satvic and rajasic and tamasic energy as described in the Hindu tradition? You don't want to take tamasic energy and turn it into rajasic, but you take it and use it.

A: That's right, yes. It is very practical, actually. Generally we tend to prepare too much. We say, "Once I make a lot of money, then I will go somewhere to study and meditate and become a priest," or whatever it is we would like to become. But we never do it on the spot. We always speak in terms of, "Once I do something, then . . ." We always plan too much. We want to change our lives rather than use our lives, the present moment, as part of the practice, and this hesitation on our part creates a lot of setbacks in our spiritual practice. Most of us have romantic ideas—"I'm bad now but one day, when I change, I'll be good."

Q: Is the principle of transmutation expressed in art?

A: Yes. As we all know, similar combinations of colors and patterns have been created by different people from different cultures at different times. Spontaneous, expressive art automatically has a universal quality. That is why you do not have to go beyond anything. If you see fully and directly, then *that* speaks, *that* brings some understanding. Choosing a green light for go in traffic and a red light for stop, for danger, suggests some kind of universality in the effect of color.

Q: What about dance and theater?

A: It is the same thing. The trouble is, if you become too self-conscious in creating a work of art, then it ceases to be a work of art. When masters of art are completely absorbed in their work, they produce masterpieces, not because they are aware of their teachers, but because they become completely absorbed in the work. They do not question, they just do it. They produce the right thing quite accidentally.

Q: How is the fear or paranoia that interferes with spontaneity transmuted into action?



A: There are no special tricks involved in overcoming this and overcoming that in order to achieve a certain state of being. It is a question of leaping. When a person actually understands that he is in a state of paranoia, then that implies an underlying deep subconscious understanding of the other side, some feeling of the other aspect of it in his mind. Then he has to really take the leap. How to take the leap is very difficult to explain in words; one simply has to do it. It is rather like suddenly being pushed overboard into a river and discovering that you can swim; you just swim across the river. However, if you were to go back to the river and attempt to practice, you probably would not be able to swim at all. It is a question of spontaneity, of using the current intelligence. One cannot explain taking the leap in words; it is beyond words. But it is something that you will be able to do if you really are willing to do it, if you put yourself in the situation to leap and somehow surrender.

Q: If you are frightened and have a strong reaction to the fear, you are aware of the reaction but don't want to get lost in it, you want to remain conscious. How do you do it?

A: It is a question of first acknowledging that such energy is there, which is the energy to leap, as well. In other words, instead of running away from fear, one must become completely involved in it and begin to feel the rough and rugged quality of the emotion.

Q: Become a warrior?

A: Yes. At the beginning one might be satisfied with seeing the absurdity of the emotion, which would disperse it. But this is still not enough to effect the transmutation principle of vajrayana. One must see the "form is form" quality of the emotions. Once you are able to look at the emotions properly, from the point of view of "form is form, emotion is emotion," without your preconceptions attached, once you see the naked quality of the emotions as they are, then you are ready to leap. It does not need much effort. You are already delivered to the leap, so to speak. This does not mean of course that, if you are angry, you go out and commit murder.

Q: In other words, see the emotion as it is instead of involving your self in a scattered, penetrating reaction to a situation.

A: Yes. You see, we do not actually see emotion properly, although we are completely filled with it. If we follow our emotions and escape them by doing something, that is not experiencing them properly. We

try to escape or repress our emotions because we cannot bear to be in such a state. But the vajrayana speaks of looking properly, directly at the emotion and feeling it, its naked quality. You do not actually have to transmute. In fact, you see the already transmuted quality in the emotions: "form is form." It is very subtle and quite dangerous to just throw about.

Q: How does Milarepa's life fit into the pattern of tantra? He does not seem to practice transmutation, but rather, renunciation.

A: Of course, in his lifestyle Milarepa is a classic example of the yogi-renunciate tradition. But usually, when we think of a renunciant, we think of someone who is trying to escape the "evil" of the "worldly" life. This is not the case with Milarepa at all. He was not trying to suppress his "evil" inclinations by meditating alone in the wilderness. He did not lock himself into retreat. He was not trying to punish himself. His asceticism was simply an expression of his character, just as each of our lifestyles is an expression of who we are, determined by our psychologies and past histories. Milarepa wanted to be simple and he led a very simple life.

Certainly there is a tendency on the part of people following a religious path to become otherworldly for awhile, and Milarepa was no exception. But people can do this in the middle of a city. Wealthy people can spend a great deal of money going on a religious "trip." But sooner or later, if a person is going to really connect with the teachings, there must be a return to the world. When Milarepa was meditating in retreat, living very austere, some hunters appeared by chance and gave him some fresh venison. He ate it and his meditation improved immediately. And later on, when he was hesitating to come down to the cities, some villagers appeared at his cave asking for teachings. He was continually being drawn out of isolation by the seemingly accidental play of life situations, which one could say is the play of the guru, the universality of guru, which always presents itself to us naturally. We may be sitting in meditation in our New York apartment, feeling very "high" and euphoric, very "spiritual." But then we get up and walk into the streets and someone steps on our toe and we have to deal with that. It brings us down to earth, back to the world.

Milarepa was tremendously involved with the process of transmutation of energies and emotions. In fact, when we read *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, the whole first part of the book is dealing with Milarepa's experience of this process. In "The Tale of Red Rock Jewel Valley" Milarepa had only recently left Marpa to go off and meditate

alone. This might be called his "adolescent stage," because he was still involved with reliance upon a personal guru. Marpa was still his "daddy." Having opened and surrendered to Marpa, Milarepa still had to learn to transmute the emotions. He was still clinging to the notions of "good" and "bad," and so the world was still appearing to him in the guise of gods and demons.

In "The Tale of Red Rock Jewel Valley," when Milarepa went back into his cave after having a comforting vision of Marpa, he was confronted with a gang of demons. He tried every way he could think of to get rid of them, all kinds of tactics. He threatened them, cajoled them, he even preached the dharma to them. But they would not leave until he ceased regarding them as "bad" and opened to them, saw them as they were. This was the beginning of Milarepa's period of learning how to subjugate the demons, which is the same thing as transmuting the emotions. It is with our emotions that we create demons and gods: those things which we don't want in our lives and world are the demons; those things which we would draw to us are the gods and goddesses. The rest is just scenery.

By being willing to accept the demons and gods and goddesses as they are, Milarepa transmuted them. They became dakinis, or the energies of life. The whole first part of *The Hundred Thousand Songs* deals with Milarepa's mastery of transmutation, his growing ability to open to the world as it is, until he finally conquered all the demons in the chapter "The Goddess Tserinma's Attack." In this chapter thousands of demons assemble to terrify and attack Milarepa while he is meditating, but he preaches to them, is open and accepting, willing to offer them his whole being, and they are subjugated. At one point five demonesses, beginning to realize that they cannot frighten Milarepa, sing to him.

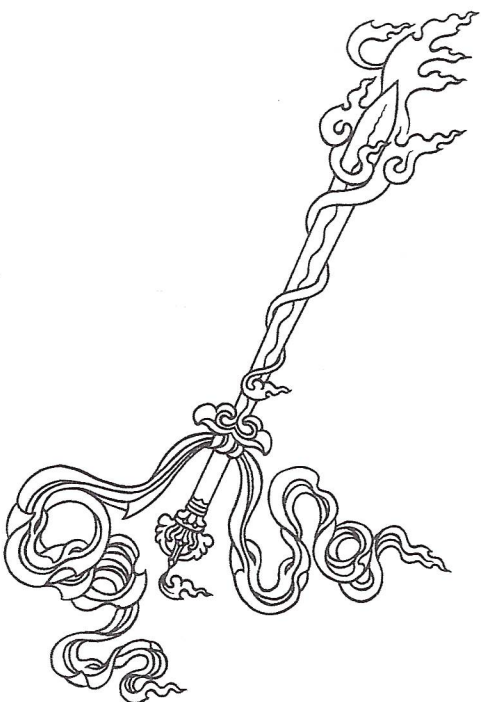
*If the thought of demons  
Never rises in your mind,  
You need not fear the demon hosts around you.  
It is most important to tame your mind within . . .*<sup>1</sup>

*On the steep path of fear and hope  
They lie in ambush . . .*<sup>2</sup>

And later Milarepa himself says, "Insofar as the Ultimate, or the true nature of being is concerned, there are neither Buddhas nor demons. He who frees himself from fear and hope, evil and virtue, will realize the insubstantial and groundless nature of confusion. Samsara will then appear to be the Mahamudra itself . . ."<sup>3</sup>

The rest of *The Hundred Thousand Songs* deals with Milarepa's development as a teacher and his relationships with his students. Toward the end of his life he had completely perfected the transmutation process to the point where he could be called the vidyadhara, or "holder of the crazy wisdom." No longer could he be swayed by the winds of hope and fear. The gods and goddesses and demons, his passions and their external projections, had been completely subjugated and transformed. Now his life was a continual dance with the dakinis.

Finally Milarepa reached the "old dog" stage, his highest attainment. People could tread on him, use him as a road, as earth; he would always be there. He transcended his own individual existence so that, as we read his last teachings, there is a sense of the universality of Milarepa, the example of enlightenment.



1. Garma C. C. Chang, *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* (New York, 1962), p. 304.  
2. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 308.