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Imagining Enlightenment: Icons and Ideology in Vajrayāna Buddhist Practice

Karma Lekshe Tsomo¹ 

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Abstract

Iconography has been used to represent the experience of awakening in the Buddhist traditions for millennia. The Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions are especially renowned for their rich pantheons of buddhas and bodhisattvas who illuminate and inspire practitioners. In addition, the Vajrayāna branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism presents a host of meditational deities (*yidam*) who serve as catalysts of awakening. These awakened beings are regarded as objects of refuge for practitioners, both female and male, who visualize themselves in detail as embodiments of specific enlightened figures, female or male, with all their enlightened qualities. These meditational deities, which are mentally constructed and insubstantial by nature, are distinguished from worldly deities (*deva*) who also inhabit the Buddhist pantheon and may be supplicated for attaining worldly boons. This article explores the philosophical foundations of Vajrayāna Buddhist practices, the ontological status of these archetypes of awakening, and the epistemological process of visualizing oneself an enlightened being as a skillful means to achieve awakened realization.

Keywords Deities · Iconography · Gender identity · Vajrayāna

Scholars generally regard Mahāyāna Buddhism as a natural focus of religious studies because of its rich pantheon of *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*. The Vajrayāna branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism especially has numerous “meditational deities” (*yidam*) who inhabit the tantric Buddhist pantheon, along with a host of other supernatural beings such as *dakas*, *dakinīs*, and *dharmapalas* who act as defenders of Dharma.¹ Many scholars understand *yidams* to be Buddhist versions of the divine,² but they are not

¹Rhie and Thurman (2000). For context, see Bechert and Gombrich (1984).

²Miranda Shaw, for example, uses designators such as “divinities,” “goddesses,” and “the feminine divine” in her work: Shaw (2015, 1994).

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neatly commensurate with other beings inhabiting the Buddhist pantheon or the divinities of other religious traditions.³ Some may understand them to be divine fictions constructed to lead aspirants on the path to awakening. Artists may see them as creative imaginations or representations.⁴ During a private conversation in 1985, H.H. the Dalai Lama told me these beings can be understood as projections of the mind. In this article, I explore the philosophical foundations of Tibetan Buddhist iconography and ideology, with special attention to their implications for gender identity.

Icons of Awakening

The Buddhist conception of the universe is philosophically nontheistic, concerned primarily with overcoming suffering rather than with the existence or non-existence of a supreme being or deities. At its core are the three characteristics of existence that phenomena are unsatisfying, impermanent, and insubstantial, or empty of inherent existence. Early detractors regarded Buddhism negatively as a decadent, atheist belief system (Offermanns 2005). Even some Buddhist practitioners have argued that Buddhism can be regarded as atheistic, due to the absence of a supreme being in the likeness of the God of Abrahamic traditions.⁵ On the other hand, Buddhism cannot be labeled atheistic because *devas* (deities), also known as or *devatās*, have been an integral feature of Buddhist cosmology from the time of Buddha Śākyamuni onward. A common epithet of the Buddha is “teacher of gods and human beings” (*sattha devamanussanam*) (Thepyanmongkol 2010). Buddhists may petition *devas* for protection and blessing, a custom prevalent in South and Southeast Asian cultures, but they do not go for refuge in them, since the *devas* themselves are still trapped in cyclic existence, the wheel of repeated birth, death, and rebirth (*sam.sāra*). Only *buddhas* (fully awakened beings), *bodhisattvas* (beings on the path to full awakening), and others who are highly advanced on the path are qualified to be relied upon as objects of refuge. Some have regarded these supernormal beings dismissively, arguing they are evidence of the degeneration or corruption of “pure” Buddhism due to Hindu or indigenous influences.⁶ However, the Buddha himself is acknowledged to have been a *bodhisattva* in past lives while working to become fully awakened and the *devas* were painted into the Buddhist pantheon from the very beginning as the bestowers of boons. Buddhist followers simply adjusted their perspectives on supernormal phenomena and accommodated them, reinterpreting them through a Buddhist lens.

Mahāyāna Buddhism developed a variety of philosophical schools, methods of practice, and cultural expressions. Multiple interpretations of key teachings are common. In terms of method, Tibetan scholars typically distinguish two branches of Mahāyāna practice: the *pāramitāyāna* (perfection vehicle, also known as *sūtrayāna*) and the *mantrayana* (*mantra* vehicle, also known as *tantrayāna* or *vajrayāna*). Adherents of both branches generally accept the pivotal Mahāyāna concept of

³ These categories come under scrutiny in Jackson and Makransky (2000).

⁴ For an artist’s approach to these images and their significance, see Lhadrepa and Davis (2017).

⁵ For a thorough philosophical analysis of the question, see Hayes (1988). For a Buddhist secularist view, see Batchelor (2011).

⁶ Jeffrey Hopkins refutes these arguments in (1990).

tathāgatagarbha (“womb of enlightenment”) that each sentient being possesses the potential to become perfectly awakened.

The potential for awakening is a birthright of all sentient beings; that is, all sentient beings, by virtue of possessing conscious awareness, are capable of purifying and awakening that awareness. The wise among them, mostly human beings, evolve toward that goal by following the path outlined by the Buddha. The Buddha taught that world systems come into existence and disintegrate as a result of cause and conditions—the inexorable law of cause and effect. The Buddha’s teachings guide human beings toward an understanding of how the law of cause and effect operates, and therefore how to avoid misfortunes by purifying their own unwholesome propensities and *karma* through the use of countless skillful methods for creating wholesome actions and avoiding unwholesome actions. Vajrayāna practice accelerates this practice by recognizing, praising, and identifying with the commendable qualities of the awakened ones (*buddhas*) and meditational deities (*vidams*), who represent the embodiments of enlightened qualities that lead to full realization as displayed by all *buddhas*. Over time, lineages of accomplished *gurus* have promulgated systems of practice that use enlightened archetypes to awaken, strengthen, and enhance realizations of the Buddha’s insights on ethics, creativity, and wisdom.

In the Vajrayāna tradition, numerous *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* serve as *vidams*, or meditational deities. However, the word “deity” is used advisedly, since it has, in general, a wide range of denotations in religious studies, particularly in *tantric* studies. A deity may manifest in either a peaceful or wrathful aspect and deities in multiple forms may also appear in both peaceful and wrathful aspects. Avalokitśvara, the *bodhisattva* of compassion, whose face reflects serenity and benevolence, is an example of a deity in peaceful form, whether with two arms, four arms, or a thousand arms. Yamantaka, Hevajra, and Mahakala are examples of deities who appear in wrathful form. The wrathful deities are not demons—a common misconception—but manifestations of one’s own mind that forcefully eliminate all inner and outer obstacles to awakening.

In the Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition, *vidams* appear in both female and male forms. Remarkably from a gender-binary perspective, practitioners of both genders engage in the practice of either female or male *vidams*. By engaging in the practice of the *sādhana*, a complex series of recitations, visualizations, and contemplative exercises of a specific *vidam*, the practitioner aims to manifest and literally embody all the unique, enlightened physical, verbal, and mental qualities of that *vidam*. The *vidam* that is most widely practiced today by both women and men is Tārā, an enlightened being in female form who appears as both a *bodhisattva* (prior to full awakening) and as a *buddha* (after realizing full awakening). Appearing in India as early as the sixth century, Tārā vowed to liberate sentient beings, taking the form of a woman. Once upon a time, in a universe called Manifold Lights, she took rebirth as a princess named Yeshe Dawa (“Moon of Wisdom”). After making many millions of offerings to a Buddha named Dundubhi-svara (“Drum-Sound”) and his attendants, she generated *bodhicitta*, the altruistic aspiration to become a fully awakened Buddha. At that time, some monks encouraged her to take a male body, but she rejected their suggestion, saying:

Here there is no man, there is no woman,
 No self, no person, and no consciousness.
 Labelling “male” or “female” has no essence,
 But deceives the evil-minded world (Willson 1996).

Instead of taking a male body, she vowed:

“There are many who desire
 Enlightenment in a man’s body, but none who work for the
 benefit of sentient beings in the body of a woman. Therefore,
 until *sam.sāra* is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient
 beings in a woman’s body.”⁷

After accumulating merit and wisdom for many millions of years, Tārā attained the final goal of perfect awakening and continued her mission of working to liberate sentient beings from suffering.

Tārā appears in 21 different aspects, each in a unique pose with specific qualities and abilities to benefit beings.⁸ Two of the most prevalent manifestations are Green Tārā, who embodies virtuous activity, and White Tārā, who helps practitioners to live a good and long life. Tārā is renowned for her power to swiftly remove mental defilements and to work ceaselessly for the benefit of all living beings. Also known as the “savioress” and the “mother of all Buddhas,” Tārā is the focus of devotions performed daily by millions of devotees throughout the Tibetan cultural sphere, including Tibet itself, Bhutan, Sikkim, and other areas of Himalayan India, Mongolia, Nepal, and the Buddhist republics of Russia. In these devotions, Tārā is embodied by monastic and lay practitioners alike. The presence of highly accomplished, fully awakened beings in female form, such as Tārā, continues to inspire women as well as men and men up to the present day. Tārā’s popularity among Himalayan peoples may help explain the relatively high status of women in these cultures.

Tārā is just one of countless *vidams* available to aspirants. Once a practitioner chooses a suitable *vidam*, or the *guru* selects one, the practitioner receives an empowerment (*abhis.eka*) during which the *guru* authorizes the initiate to engage in the *tantric* practices using that deity as the object of visualization.⁹ First, the practitioner visualizes the *vidam* externally and then internally, identifying completely with the body, speech,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Based on the work of Madar Ghosh in *Development of Buddhist iconography in Eastern India: a study of Tārā, Prajñās of five Tathāgatas and Bhrikutī* (New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1980), Martin Willson traces Tārā’s appearance to the sixth century CE. in India, where she appears in a triad with Avalokiteśvara and Bhrikutī. Willson, *In praise of Tara*, 12.

⁹ Dalai Lama, Tsong-ka-pa and Hopkins (1987).

and mind of the *yidam*. Generating the “divine pride” of *being* the *yidam*, the practitioner replaces his or her ordinary perception of identity with a fully enlightened identity. This shifts the practitioner’s awareness from the typically deluded, unawakened mode of perception common to ordinary beings in the mundane world into a perfectly awakened mode of perception that is distinctive to an enlightened being. The practitioner then generates pride in embodying that being. As John Powers explains,

Divine pride is essential because it overcomes the sense of oneself as ordinary. Since one’s goal is to become a fully awakened buddha, one attempts to view oneself in this way. Divine pride is different from ordinary, afflicted pride because it is motivated by compassion for others and is based on an understanding of emptiness. The *yidam* and oneself are both known to be empty, all appearances are viewed as manifestations of the luminous and empty nature of mind, and so the divine pride of deity yoga does not lead to attachment, greed, and other afflictions (Powers 2007).

The practitioner not only engages in visualization of an awakened being but also imagines performing the enlightened activities of that awakened being in order to benefit all sentient beings.

The act of imagining oneself as a fully awakened being in an alternative gender, initially during the meditation session and ultimately during every moment of day and night, requires a shift in gender perception from the practitioner’s accustomed mode to the gender of the *yidam* for a sustained period of time. The practitioner is required not only to embody the enlightened qualities of the specific *yidam* but, depending on the gender of that *yidam*, may also be required to dissociate from his or her accustomed gender and to embody an alternative gender. In effect, the practitioner is required to let go of his or her accustomed gender identity and any attachment to that identity for the duration. Because gender identity is a strong feature of most people’s personal identity, inculcated practically from birth and reinforced through years of social conditioning, it seems reasonable to suppose that releasing one’s accustomed identification with a particular gender would naturally, gradually result in releasing attachment to the self, at least in some measure. It could even be that letting go to attachment to a particular gender identification could free one, for the duration of the *sādhana*, from whatever negative associations and gendered expectations the practitioner has experienced over a lifetime, or even multiple lifetimes. The implications for those who identify as or are identified with a despised or depreciated gender classification are significant. The opportunity to disassociate oneself from the negative attitudes and experiences related to the despised gender identity could be very liberating, at least for a given period of time. Psychologically, this respite from painful associations can be very healing.

Philosophical Foundations

The Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition, also known as *tantrayāna* (“adamantine vehicle”) or *mantrayāna* (“secret *mantra* vehicle”), is renowned for its use of advanced meditation practices that simulate enlightenment. These “deity yoga” (*devatti-yoga*) practices of visualizing oneself as an enlightened being are held to be an effective means to achieve

awakening swiftly. Widespread misconceptions abound; for example, detractors declare that tantric Buddhism is an aberration from the Buddha's original teachings or an amalgamation of Buddhist and pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs (Lopez 1999). Buddhist philosophers and practitioners in the Tibetan cultural sphere declare unwaveringly, however, that Vajrayāna derives authentically from Indian traditions and is firmly grounded in Mahāyāna principles and practices, with the additional use of *mantras*, *mudrās*, *mandalas*, and advanced meditation practices for embodying enlightened awareness.¹⁰

As a branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the goal and fruit of Vajrayāna practice is Buddhahood. In Vajrayāna, the means for achieving this is to question and to subvert attachment to all ordinary, distorted perceptions, especially notions of personal identity, including gendered ones. The prerequisites for embarking on the *bodhisattva* path of Mahāyāna practice are the Three Principles of the Path to Enlightenment, eloquently elucidated by the Indian scholar-monk Atīśa in his *Bodhipratīpa* (Lamp for the Path): renunciation, the enlightened attitude (*bodhicitta*), and direct insight into emptiness (*śūnyatā*) (Rinchen 1999). Renunciation is defined as the determination to forswear rebirth in cyclic existence (*sam.sāra*). The enlightened attitude is the altruistic aspiration to achieve the perfect awakening of a *buddha* in order to free all sentient beings from suffering. Direct insight into emptiness is the wisdom that understands the true nature, meaning the lack of inherent existence, of all phenomena. Without these three prerequisites, which are necessary for entering even the mainstream *bodhisattva* path, Vajrayāna practice is impossible or even dangerous.

To elaborate on the first principle, perfect renunciation means to abandon all attachment to cyclic existence and all actions (*karma*) that lead to further rebirth, especially unwholesome actions that lead to rebirth in the “unfortunate migrations,” or lower realms of existence as an animal, hungry ghost, or hell being. To become a fully awakened Buddha requires the practitioner to avoid all unwholesome actions and mental factors, and to instead cultivate all wholesome ones. To illustrate, a serious practitioner avoids all harm to sentient beings—physical, verbal, or mental. Taking the life of a sentient being (any being with consciousness) is regarded as especially unwholesome and typically leads to rebirth in a hell realm. Not only is rebirth in a hell realm tortuous but it can also last for an extremely long time, which poses a serious obstacle to achieving liberation.

The second requisite principle for achieving perfect awakening is to generate the *bodhicitta* (“enlightened attitude”), the altruistic resolve to become a fully awakened being in order to liberate all sentient beings from suffering. The Indian master Śantideva regarded this enlightened resolve as the essence of the 84,000 teachings of the Buddha. There are seven steps for cultivating the enlightened attitude, based on the understanding that all sentient beings have taken rebirth in cyclic existence time and again, and have therefore been related to each other in a multitude of ways. The seven steps are (1) recognizing that all sentient beings have been our mother at some point in time, giving birth to us and showering us with loving kindness an infinite number of times; (2) recognizing that we owe a debt of gratitude to all these sentient beings who have been our mother and cared for us so lovingly; (3) determining to repay the kindness of all these sentient beings; (4) generating loving kindness (*maitrī*), the wish

¹⁰ For example, see Cozort (2005).

that all sentient beings achieve happiness; (5) generating compassion (*karunā*), the wish that all beings be free from suffering; (6) generating the special thought (Tibetan: *lhak sam*) of oneself taking on the responsibility of liberating all sentient beings from suffering; and (7) generating *bodhicitta*, the altruistic aspiration to achieve perfect awakening, recognizing that ultimately only a Buddha has the capacity to liberate all sentient beings from suffering (Tsono, 2015a).

The third requisite principle is direct insight into emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The root cause of unskillful actions and therefore of sentient beings' involvement in cyclic existence is ignorance, or not understanding the true mode of existence of phenomena. Ignorant sentient beings mistakenly perceive fleeting phenomena to be permanent, unsatisfying phenomena to be satisfying, and insubstantial phenomena to be truly existent. Gaining insight into emptiness is the key corrective to these misconceptions.

In the practice of Vajrayāna, meditation is enhanced through yogic techniques such as meditation on the winds and channels of the body. The ability to gather the 72,000 winds (Tibetan: *lung*) or energies of the body into the central psychic channel is cultivated so that, at the time of death, one may direct one's consciousness to a Pure Land, such as the Pure Land of Amitābha Buddha. In each of the four classes of *tantra*—action, performance, *yoga*, and highest *yoga* (*anuttarayoga*)—the practitioner generates a vivid visualization of a specific *yidam*, then identifies with all the qualities of the *yidam*, and finally generates the divine pride of actually *being* the *yidam*. At the time of death, this eventuates in being reborn in the Pure Land of that specific *yidam*.

The enlightened figure that is the focus of one's visualization may appear either in peaceful or wrathful form. The purpose of the practice is not to eliminate, overcome, or even transform mental defilements but to encounter them and utilize them as the path to awakening. Like fertilizer, afflictive emotions such as desire, if used skillfully, may be a means of realizing the path.¹¹ For example, in all four classes of *tantra*, the practitioner consciously generates four types of bliss—expressed as looking, laughing, embracing, and union—and utilizes them as tools for cultivation (Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa 1975). The male/female symbolism is code for the complementarity of skillful means (*upāya*), associated with the male principle, and wisdom (*prajñā*), associated with the female. The male and female deities in union (*yab-yum*) signify the nonduality of skillful means and wisdom, or bliss and emptiness.

Skillful Means of Awakening

Prior to embarking on *tantric* practices, a practitioner is required to have a solid understanding of basic Buddhist teachings. A practitioner trains daily in ethical conduct (*śīla*), meditative concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). Further, a practitioner cultivates the six perfections (*pāramitā*): generosity (*dāna*), ethical conduct, patience (*ks.antī*), joyful effort (*vīrya*), concentration (*dhyāna*), and wisdom.¹²

¹¹ Among other useful works, see Yeshe (2014).

¹² An alternative listing of ten perfections adds four more: skillful means (*upāya-kausalya*), aspiration (*pañihāna*), power (*bala*), and exalted wisdom (*jñāna*). These ten perfections are emphasized respectively on the ten stages (*bhūmis*) of the *bodhisattva* path leading to the state of perfect awakening of a *buddha* (Tsono 2015b).

The third of the six perfections of the *bodhisattva* is patience, a valued antidote to anger. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama likens the practice of patience by the *bodhisattva* to the patience of a mother when her baby “kicks her, pulls her hair, and sticks a finger in her eye. She is patient, knowing how long her task will take. In the same way, a Bodhisattva is willing to spend an aeon to achieve one slight improvement in one sentient being.”¹³

In addition to the three principles of the path that serve as prerequisites, a Vajrayāna practitioner is required to complete the preliminary practices (*ngön dro*): 100,000 repetitions each of the refuge formula, prostrations, the 100-syllable *mantra* of Vajrasattva, the *mandala* offering, and *guru yoga*. *Guru yoga* practices vary considerably, according to the *guru*'s instructions, but each involves a visualization with the *guru* at the center of a lineage tree, surrounded by an assemblage that serves as a composite of the objects of refuge. Through the power of visualization, one evokes the presence of these enlightened beings as a source of teachings and blessings.

After completing these preliminary practices, one seeks to receive an empowerment (*abhis.eka*) from a qualified *tantric* master. This empowerment initiates one into the *mandala* of a specific *yidam*. The rite typically entails receiving four successive empowerments: vase, secret, knowledge, and word.¹⁴ As mentioned earlier, the *yidam* that is visualized and eventually embodied may be either a *buddha* or a *bodhisattva*, male or female, and in addition, may appear in either peaceful or wrathful form. Initially, the practitioner visualizes the *yidam* in the space in front, in progressively greater and greater detail. Gradually, in visualization, the *yidam* is brought to the space on the top of the practitioner's head, facing forward. Ultimately, again in visualization, the *yidam* is visualized as moving down into the practitioner such that the body, speech, and mind of the *yidam* and the body, speech, and mind of the practitioner merge and become one. The goal is for the practitioner to embody all the enlightened qualities of the *yidam* physically, verbally, and mentally. As the *sādhana* progresses, the practitioner visualizes all living beings throughout space and time in the likeness of the *yidam*: all forms are seen to be the form of the *yidam*, all sounds are perceived to be the sound of the *yidam*'s *mantra*, and all thoughts are realized to be the enlightened awareness of the *yidam*.

The ontological status of the *yidam* is open to debate; is it real or metaphorical? The most important thing to understand is that the *yidam* must not be reified or essentialized, for that would be to defeat the entire point of the exercise. The key point is to realize the ultimately empty nature of all aspects of the practice, including the practitioner, the practice itself, and the sentient beings toward whom one directs or dedicates the merit of the practice. The *yidam* who is the object of one's visualization and the *mandala* that is both the perfectly purified abode of the *yidam* and an enlightened universe are recognized as being empty of true existence by nature.

Simultaneous with the attainment of perfect enlightenment (*samyaksambodhi*), one achieves the two bodies of the Buddha: the *dharmakāya* (“truth body”) or formless enlightened awareness of an awakened being and the *rūpakāya* (“form body”), a body that may be perceived by sentient beings. The truth body may be understood in two aspects: the omniscient nature of enlightened awareness (*jnana dharmakāya*) and the

¹³ Tsong-kha-pa, *Tantra in Tibet*, 177.

¹⁴ For an explanation of these empowerments, see Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, 270–71.

empty nature of enlightened awareness (*svabhavakāya*). The form body may also be understood in two aspects: the enjoyment body (*sambhogakāya*) that can be perceived by beings in the Pure Land and the emanation body (*nirmanakāya*) that can be perceived by ordinary sentient beings in the world. To achieve the truth body (*dharmakāya*), through the practice of meditative equipoise, one cultivates wisdom or insight into emptiness. To achieve the form body (*rupakāya*), one cultivates skillful means (*upāya*) out of compassion. The cultivation of wisdom results in the cognitive perfection of a Buddha, whereas the cultivation of skillful means culminates in the physical perfection of a Buddha. The causes and consequences of actions are similar by nature; that is, imprints of accumulated wisdom give rise to the *dharmakāya*, while the imprints of skillful methods give rise to the *rupakāya*. Meditation on emptiness is essential, but meditation on emptiness alone is inadequate for the achievement of enlightenment. Meditation on emptiness needs to be conjoined with altruism and appropriate skillful methods to alleviate the sufferings of and bring happiness to all living beings.

Cultivating Enlightened Awareness

Buddhist *tantra* uses visualization as a means of transformative thinking, utilizing ordinary mental defilements like anger and desire as instruments on the path of enlightenment by facing them directly and gaining insight into their true nature. The practice contains elements of visionary experience common to other spiritual traditions, but in the case of Buddhist *tantra*, the ability to control visual projections is essential. “Deity yoga,” visualizing oneself as an awakened being and ultimately *becoming* that being, is the heart of the practice. The activities of *tantric* deities include pacifying, increasing, empowering, and destroying. Although some of the awakened beings portrayed in Buddhist *tantra* have corollaries in Hindu *tantra*,¹⁵ they are not seen as ordinary gods, but as archetypes of one’s own enlightenment. As Miranda Shaw puts it,

While Mahayana writers and iconographers introduced divinities of recognizably Buddhist provenance, they often drew attributes from earlier figures and Hindu deities, adding their own distinctive stamp through an innovative combination of classical iconographical elements, a Buddhist origin myth, and salvific activities of a decidedly Buddhist cast.... The female figures display the defining bodhisattva attributes of wisdom, compassion, and commitment to the liberation of all beings (Shaw 2006).

The major differences between Hindu tantric system and Buddhist tantric system are seen in The Three Principles of the Path. In addition to developing perfect renunciation and generating the *bodhicitta*, tantric Buddhist practitioners conceive of the *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* as being empty of absolute or eternal existence, like everything else in the phenomenal world. Further, in the practice of Buddhist *tantra*, by visualizing and identifying with the qualities of a specific awakened being, one simulates the

¹⁵ For example, Saraswati appears as the goddess of knowledge, art, and learning in both the Hindu and Buddhist pantheons.

embodiment of those qualities until one attains perfect awakening oneself, potentially within that very lifetime.

To take on the identity of an awakened being is central to Vajrayāna practice, first as a simulation of the attainment of awakening and eventually as an actualization of it. The cultivation of the enlightened body of a Buddha is achieved through various practices, including deity yoga practice, and culminates in a body (*rupakāya*) with 32 major and 80 minor marks at the time of perfect enlightenment (*samyaksambodhi*). In the Buddhist *tantric* mode of cultivation, after visualizing the *yidam* in the space in front of oneself, one unites one's body, speech, and mind with the *yidam*'s enlightened body, speech, and mind. All forms become the enlightened form of the *yidam*, all sounds become the *mantra* of the *yidam*, and all cognition becomes the enlightened wisdom of the *yidam*. Unlike worldly pride, which is regarded as a mental delusion and one of the chief obstacles to spiritual attainment, generating the "divine pride" of embodying the *yidam* is said to expedite the achievement of perfect awakening. For this reason, Vajrayāna, the practice of *tantra*, is known as the swift path. While it charts a speedy course to the ultimate achievement of awakening, the path also entails responsibilities and risks. Misusing and abusing the practice by transgressing the fourteen root precepts is said to land one for countless eons in Vajra Hell, a realm of grave suffering reserved for those who create egregious misdeeds.¹⁶ For this reason, Vajrayāna is also known as the steep but dangerous path.

The representation of sexual union between two enlightened beings, male and female, is symbolic of the union of wisdom and compassion that is required for becoming a Buddha. The practice of Vajrayāna begins by receiving an empowerment from a qualified *lama* (meaning *guru* or spiritual teacher). One then makes a pledge (*samaya*) to observe the tantric vows, that is, to refrain from the fourteen root downfalls and auxiliary transgressions, the fourteenth root downfall being, notably, "despising women, whose essence is wisdom," inclusive of both extraordinary and ordinary women (Je Tsongkhapa 2005). Having made these commitments, one then hones one's ability to concentrate single-pointedly on complex visualized images of *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*, down to each hair of the eyebrows. For most practitioners, including all celibate monastics, *tantric* practices are accomplished through visualization; only a highly advanced *yogi* is qualified to practice with an actual consort. A monk or nun who is qualified to engage in these practices must first relinquish the monastic vows.

If the *yidam* is shown in sexual union, the practitioner consciously generates successive levels of sexual desire in order to understand the true nature of desire. In Buddhist *tantra*, practice with an actual consort, as opposed to a visualized consort, was an option for a highly advanced practitioner, provided that the person was not under monastic vows and satisfied the prerequisite three principles of the path: perfect renunciation, the enlightened attitude of thorough-going altruism, and direct insight into emptiness. Adherents of all Tibetan Buddhist schools, including the Gelugpa ("Virtuous Ones"), regard the authentic practice of sexual yoga as virtuous, provided the rigorous, nearly impossible requirements are met. A person under

¹⁶ Ngari Panchen and Pema Wangyi Gyalpo (commentary by Dudjom Rinpoche Jigdral Yeshe Dorje, trans. Khenpo Gyurme Samdrub and Sangye Khandro), *Perfect Conduct: Ascertaining the Three Vows* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1999), 117, 124, 134. The *tantra Hasti-upapraveśya* describes how those whose *samaya* has deteriorated may "confess and perfectly restore it." (138)

monastic vows and most other practitioners rely on a visualized consort rather than an actual living consort.

In Vajrayāna, visualization practice is used to transform perceptions and thereby the ways we respond to the world. The *yidam* that is the focus of tantric practice is an archetype of enlightenment and is understood to be empty (*śūnya*) of true existence, just as *buddhas*, *bodhisattvas*, ordinary beings, and all other phenomena are empty by nature. The *yidam* that is the object of deity yoga, whether in peaceful or wrathful form, is understood to be an archetype of enlightenment and a product of one's own mind. The *yidam* is usually selected by one's lama, as an expression of his/her skillful means (*upāya*), and reflects the synergy or compatibility of the *yidam* and the karmic affinities of the practitioner. An understanding of the process of visualization requires an understanding of human consciousness and the way human beings habitually misperceive reality. Instead of perceiving phenomena purely and directly, the awareness of ordinary individuals is typically mediated and distorted by labels, concepts, and judgments. The root cause of these distortions, the mental defilements, obstructs one's perception of the true nature of phenomena, which may result in unwholesome actions. The process of visualizing oneself as an awakened being is a means of cutting through mental defilements powerfully and precisely, and averting unwholesome actions and their consequences. As one becomes intimately familiar with the visualized *yidam* and identifies intimately with that being's enlightened qualities, one simultaneously gains insight into the true nature of one's own mind and one's potential for enlightenment.

By honing the ability to construct the *yidam* and environs, one becomes adept at understanding the mind's ability to consciously project mental forms and content. In the process, one also recognizes the tendency both to perceive, misperceive, and construct one's experience mistakenly, distorted by habitual tendencies such as greed, hatred, and other destructive emotions. In tantric meditation practice, one gains mastery through a process of mental deconstruction, constructive projection, and realization, instead of remaining a hapless victim of mental afflictions, misperceptions, and mental projections. One aspect of the process is nurturing the ability to control one's mind; another aspect is constructing an ideal universe and manifesting an enlightened mode of perception that is spontaneously wise and compassionate. Not only does the practitioner use archetypes of peace, generosity, and loving kindness but also powerful thoughts and emotions such as desire and anger, as skillful means of effecting awakening.

The enlightened forms used as objects of Vajrayāna meditation practice are intricate and varied. As one progressively envisions, supplicates, and embodies these enlightened figures, one generates a nondual awareness of both the ordinary, unenlightened state of consciousness and the ultimate, enlightened awareness of the *yidam*. This process is analogous to the nondual status of *sam.sāra* and *nirvāna*, both empty by nature. Calm abiding (*samathā*) and insight (*vipasyanā*), the two primary streams of meditation practice, are used alternately, first, to analyze and, second, to fix the mind on emptiness. In Vajrayāna practice, the enlightened form of the *yidam* is understood to simultaneously be conventionally existent and ultimately empty. Just as *sam.sāra* and *nirvāna* are both ultimately empty, the conventional level of reality exists simultaneously with its lack of inherent existence. So, while the ultimate aim of *tantric* practice is the perfect awakening of a Buddha, practical benefits may also be gained from the practice, such as the ability to overcome obstacles, subdue negative forces, and enjoy long life and good health.

The tantric texts describe ritual practices (*sādhana*) that integrate a variety of methods and practices related to the *yidam*.¹⁷ A *tantric sādhana* begins with going for refuge and the generation of *bodhicitta*, the altruistic attitude that aspires to liberate all beings from suffering. Next, the practitioner consciously dissolves ordinary reality into emptiness and, in its place, constructs a visualization of the *yidam*, to whom homage is offered and supplications and offerings are made. Light rays generated from the *yidam* remove all one's impurities and karmic obstructions, transforming the environment into the pure abode of the *yidam*. The body, speech, and mind of the practitioner and all sentient beings become identified with the enlightened body, speech, and mind of the *yidam*. As described, all forms are seen as the form of the *yidam*, all sounds as the *mantra*, and all thoughts as the perfect wisdom of the enlightened ones. A *mantra* visualized at the center of the practitioner's heart is then recited for as long as possible. The practice concludes with dissolving the entire visualization back into emptiness. Next, one meditates on the empty nature of one's own mind. Finally, one dedicates to all sentient beings the merit that has accrued through the practice. The *yidam* is visualized as abiding within an elaborate *mandala*, or pure, enlightened abode that may be made of various materials, accompanied by the chanting of a liturgy that includes praises, requests, *mantras* (sound syllables), and *mūdras* (ritual hand gestures). As described earlier, the form of the *yidam* is visualized in the space in front, then on the crown of one's head, until eventually one embodies the *yidam*, becoming one with that being's enlightened body, speech, and mind. An example of a *sādhana* is the Avalokiteśvara practice for cultivating compassion.¹⁸

In Vajrayāna practice, the senses are not ignored or suppressed; rather, they are given full rein with a totally transformed imagination, coupled with the enormous responsibility to maintain awakened awareness every moment of day and night. The creative power of imagination to transform mind and emotions cannot be dismissed. Because imagination and reality are interwoven, creative imagination can also be an effective means of transforming the world around us. Rather than squandering the power of imagination and precious time on trivialities, they can be used to transform the world by cultivating insight, compassion, and enlightened awareness. The power of tantric practice is not simply theoretical, but is attested by the attainments of practitioners such as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and a host of realized beings produced in Tibet since the Vajrayāna texts and teachings were first introduced from India—superheroes who vanquish destructive emotions and self-interest. In the end, these practices lend truth to the adage: “If we can transform our minds, we can transform our world.” Now is indisputably the time to do so.

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¹⁷ For a thorough, accessible explanation of the Vajrayāna path, see Tsering (2012). Another valuable source is Rinpoche (1996).

¹⁸ Tsong-kha-pa, *Tantra in Tibet*, 233.

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