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A Masterful Guide to Vajrayana Practice

Buddhadharma
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A Cascading Waterfall of Nectar

By Thinley Norbu

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Reviewed by Francesca Fremantle

Thinley Norbu Rinpoche is a renowned writer and teacher in the Nyingma tradition. He is the eldest son of the late Dudjom Rinpoche, Jigdral Yeshe Dorje, who was the incarnation of the nineteenth-century tertön Tragtung Dudjom Lingpa. In this wonderful volume, Thinley Norbu presents his own commentaries on a treasure text revealed by Dudjom Lingpa and also on a short prayer composed by his father, who was one of the greatest realized masters to escape from Tibet and to bless the Western world with his teachings.

The first and largest section of the book is Thinley Norbu's commentary on an abbreviated version, prepared by his father, of the Vajrayana preliminary practices from the "New Treasures of Dudjom." These preliminaries are undertaken as a foundation for the main practices of Vajrayana. However, they should not in any way be regarded as simply for beginners. They are each of tremendous significance in their own right and contain the whole essence of the path. The commentary makes this abundantly clear, and it should be essential reading for all aspiring Vajrayana practitioners.

The four common, or outer, preliminaries are: contemplations on the rarity of precious human life, impermanence, karmic cause and result, and the suffering of samsara. The uncommon, or inner, preliminaries consist of going for refuge, arousing bodhicitta, mandala offering, purification through Vajrasattva, and guru yoga, with the addition of transference of consciousness (*phowa*), and "the generosity of offering one's body" (this appears to contain the extremely simplified essence of *chod*, which is sometimes added in more elaborate form to the preliminary practices).

One does not need to be a follower of this particular tradition in order to enjoy the book and discover immense riches within it. The author uses the root text as the basis for the most profound and penetrating teachings as he ranges widely over a vast spectrum of topics. For example, the four outer preliminaries will be familiar to most Buddhists, but however much one may have heard and contemplated these basic principles, fresh and illuminating insights can be found here. The commentary also clarifies many aspects of Vajrayana that may be strange or puzzling to those who are not familiar with it, and at

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the same time offers deeper understanding and renewed inspiration to those who are already practitioners.

This is especially true of the long section on developing bodhicitta, which covers the entire path up to the final accomplishment of Dzogchen. Thinley Norbu summarizes the views of the main philosophical traditions, pointing out the ways in which each is valid and at the same time incomplete; he describes in detail the bodhisattva path, with commentary on the ten bhūmis and ten paramitas; he gives an account of the creation and completion stages of Vajrayana, showing that all the deities dwell within our own bodies and naturally manifest for the benefit of beings; and he explains the attainments of the four levels of awareness-holder (vidyadhara), through which “all appearances encompassing everything are seen as the five buddha families, the male and female bodhisattvas, and the inconceivable appearance of all pure lands and palaces of mandalas.”

The heart of this section is a profound instruction on meditation, which occurs in connection with the paramita of samadhi, or meditation, but is linked to every aspect of the path in a flow of interconnecting elucidations. After a wonderful description of the state of undistracted awareness, he gives a wealth of practical advice for both beginners and more experienced meditators. The essence of meditation is “abiding in evenness,” defined as “self-occurring awareness unaffected by duality, like the nature of sky free from being born, free from ceasing, and free from abiding.” Showing that the six paramitas arise spontaneously from this state of openness, he quotes a sutra verse that illuminates them with startling simplicity:

Not grasping is generosity;
Not remaining is morality;
Not guarding is patience;
Not trying is diligence;
Not thinking is samadhi;
Not aiming is wisdom.

Between meditation sessions, one should not be deluded by appearances but should experience all phenomena like a dream or magic. This alone makes liberation possible. As well as being the source of all Mahayana qualities, all the attainments of Vajrayana arise from this state of openness: the five kleshas are naturally transformed, and the wisdom deities spontaneously manifest as one’s true nature.

Certain key points emerge as recurring themes in the book. Most important of these, and fundamental to the whole work, is the view of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection. According to this view, the alaya is the primordial ground of being, the source of everything, beyond time and place, neither samsara nor enlightenment. Within it, the pure energy of awareness arises as dharmakaya, the formless empty essence of all existence. The primordial buddha, Samantabhadra (Kuntuzangpo in Tibetan), always rests unwavering in that state of awareness and therefore perceives whatever arises as

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pure manifestations of the awakened nature, vivid yet insubstantial, like a magical display.

But sentient beings grasp at appearances as real, solid, and substantial. Thus duality is born and the mind creates the ordinary five skandhas and five elements. However, since in essence we are no different from Samantabhadra, there is always the possibility of returning to our stainless, original nature and of seeing things with pure perception. In essence, there is no difference between the buddhas' wisdom mind and the mind of sentient beings. They appear either as buddhas or sentient beings only through recognizing or not recognizing appearances to be the natural display of "great empty original purity."

Mahayana is known as the causal vehicle, the path on which the aspiring bodhisattva practices so that the seed of buddhanature ripens into enlightenment over a long period of time. Vajrayana is called the vehicle of result, since its practice rests on the confidence that the result is already accomplished: one's own mind is buddha from the very beginning. Dzogchen is the quintessence of Vajrayana, teaching not purification, nor even transformation, but simply the recognition of our true nature. Of course, in their wisdom and compassion, the great masters know that very few sentient beings are capable of such a direct path, and they never reject the innumerable skillful methods of dharma. Nevertheless, when these methods and practices are interpreted and illuminated by the Dzogchen view, they can be understood in a new light. It is a wake-up call, a tremendously powerful glimpse of what Buddhism is all about; it is truly the transcendent wisdom, gone completely beyond.

The significance of the lama or guru is a major theme of the book, first introduced in the commentary on the opening line of the root text, an homage to the guru, and later in the practice of guru yoga. Thinley Norbu quotes the great Dzogchen master Longchenpa as saying that guru yoga is "only the essence of the path itself" and "more profound than all other paths."

Many people find it hard to understand the necessity of having a guru. In Vajrayana, one is not striving toward a goal in the far distant future but is discovering and expressing the ever-present natural state. Although it has been there from the beginning, we have never been able to see it for ourselves. Therefore empowerment by a guru, who is regarded as Buddha himself, is necessary. It is said that "the lama is greater than all buddhas and shows us the greatest compassion, because although we have lived countless lives in periods where there have been buddhas, we have never before been able to perceive them, so our guru in this life is the only one who is actually caring for us."

Some people think it is wrong to regard another human being as buddha, and others may wonder how it is even possible to do so. Thinley Norbu gives a very simple answer. The world is a reflection of our own mind; the way we experience it is simply our deluded perception, the result of our habitual tendencies. The only solution is to change our perception. So we make a start here and now by thinking of the guru as buddha. It

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is, as he says, “training one’s mind to have pure perception,” for if we cannot even see our teacher as a buddha, how will ever be able to see all sentient beings as buddhas?

At the conclusion of guru yoga, the practitioner becomes one with the awakened mind of the guru and rests in the absolute, nonconceptual state. A quotation from a Dzogchen text, given near the end of the commentary, beautifully encapsulates the whole matter: “Because it is so easy, it is not trusted and remains the secret of the mind. May it be seen through the strength of the Lama’s precious teachings.”

Another of the author’s particular concerns is the danger of the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism. As he says, in order for our practice to be successful, we must have the correct view, so it important to understand exactly what is meant by these two extremes and what the Buddhist view really is.

Eternalism is the belief in some kind of eternal, unchanging deity who is separate from ordinary beings yet can bless or punish them. From the Buddhist perspective this is a positive view, and Thinley Norbu mentions several beneficial aspects of the world’s main religions. But ultimately it is mistaken because it contains the notion of a permanent self or essence.

As we so often see, with tragic results, “almost all eternalists decide that the ultimate basis of truth is believing only in their own god.” Nihilists, on the other hand, think that everything ceases at death. They believe only in what can be perceived by the senses, and they do not accept karmic causes and results beyond this life. Thinley Norbu calls them “the most pitiful of human beings.”

The middle way is not a position between these two extremes, nor is it a third, neutral state. It goes entirely beyond them both. Such a view is “always based on the state of immeasurable stainless space,” while at the same time it “never denies phenomena.”

The two extreme views are not just positions held by extremists; they are habitual tendencies within us, which also deceive the mind and lead it astray. For example, Thinley Norbu mentions the danger of falling into nihilism between meditation sessions, believing only in the evidence of the senses as we go about daily life.

In commenting on the mandala offering, in which one visualizes the cosmic mandala of Mount Meru surrounded by the four continents, he describes as nihilists those who reject Buddhist cosmology and “only believe in a small part of material existence.” He is horrified to learn that even some Buddhists harbor doubts (“this ... causes goose bumps”!). He states emphatically that in Buddhism “worlds that exist beyond the perception of beings with obscured karmic senses cannot be denied,” and that “being spiritual means believing in what is sacred and beyond the ordinary.” Indeed, he regards those who do not believe in any spiritual reality as animal-like, “not actually completely human.”

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Thinley Norbu does not appear to acknowledge that, for many people, belief in only one life actually gives life value and motivates them to make great contributions to the welfare of others. But to him such considerations would be irrelevant, since these benefits remain solely within the material realm, which is always deceptive. His strength of feeling is clear in his lengthy and fascinating discussion of the limitations of materialism, contrasted with the richness and immense positive benefits of belief. His argument is accompanied by wonderfully lyrical descriptions of the Buddhist view of the universe, based on the continual appearance and disappearance of phenomena within space. He does not reject the scientific view but puts it firmly in its place, as relative and temporary, while the explanations found in Buddhist cosmology are “maps of the basis of mind, drawn by mind.” In absolute truth there is no contradiction between them and science “because phenomena are the unending circling of wisdom.”

Thinley Norbu does not make any concessions to Western expectations or sensibilities; his presentation is thoroughly traditional, and he does not hesitate to express strong opinions or to make his points at great length. The commentary is well named, for plunged into this cascade of undiluted pure nectar the reader may occasionally feel shocked, yet also refreshed, by such an uncompromising approach.

The second commentary, called *The Light Rays of the Youthful Sun*, is on a prayer composed by Dudjom Rinpoche. This beautiful short text, seemingly simple and easy to understand, is rich in allusions, which Thinley Norbu explains at length and illuminates with many quotations from the great masters of the past. At the same time, he takes the opportunity to clarify several of the more contentious aspects of tantra, which people may find disturbing, such as eating meat, drinking alcohol, the practice of union with a consort, and the seemingly violent appearance and actions of wrathful deities.

Finally, I will take issue with the author on one small matter. He mentions the difficulty of expressing profound dharma teachings in correct or proper English and says that he has made some new words for this purpose. I am not sure what he means by this, as I have not noticed any particularly unusual translations, nor can I find anything incorrect or improper. English is an extremely flexible language, and in my opinion, he uses it most skillfully. He is a genuine master who is also a poet and an inspired communicator of dharma. This commentary is *upadesha*, which means “pith instructions from the guru” — the kind of instructions that go directly to the heart of the matter, continually pointing out to us the true nature of our mind and the ever-present reality of the awakened state. By his use of language, he constantly expresses his thought in such a way that the conceptual mind is circumvented. If one relaxes into the flow of the words, after a while it seems to carry the mind into a realm of spaciousness and clarity, where theories and conceptualization dissolve in the “immeasurable stainless sky” and one catches a glimpse of the inconceivable splendor of truth. May countless beings be blessed by reading this book.

Francesca Fremantle is the author of Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead. She lives in London.