

Class 1 – What is Tantra?

The Greater and Lesser vehicles

- Greater and Lesser vehicles are not separate paths. Each one builds on the previous one. They are distinguished in terms of method/practice, not view/wisdom.
- Primary object of abandonment vehicles is the afflictions and their seeds. The unique object of abandonment in tantra is the stains - ordinary appearances. So can see 2 truths simultaneously (see mirage as a pure land and non-inherently existent).
- Lesser vehicle goal is individual liberation (nirvana). Result is a Hinayana Arhat/Foe destroyer. Method is the wisdom realising emptiness with renunciation. Greater Vehicle goal is universal buddhahood. Result is Mahayana Arhat/Foe destroyer.

What is unique about tantra

- In Sutra, each practice is an antidote to a major affliction, its opposite. Gradually cleansing one's faults and developing love and wisdom. The method is wisdom realising emptiness, renunciation with bodhicitta - practices of the 6 Perfections, mind-training teachings. No danger, anyone can practice. Practices are by nature virtuous.
- Tantra takes the future result of full spiritual awakening as starting point. We recognise the fundamentally pure nature of our mind and think, speak and act now as though we were fully enlightened. In Tantra the method is wisdom realising emptiness, renunciation, bodhicitta with deity yoga. Tantra has practices containing desire; it is not by nature virtuous. What makes it virtuous is the foundation of the Three Principal Aspects of the Path.
- Tantra is the continuity (of mind, mindstream, one's practice) of one's consciousness moving from the present state to the awakened state of a buddha. The texts explain how to practice, they come from Buddha. The meaning is the process itself, putting the teachings into practice.

Six names of tantra

- Secret from an unsuitable vessel, one without empowerment. So as not to harm oneself or others. Lay people can practice in daily life, and no-one ever need know.
- Mantra - protects the mind. From what? Ordinary appearances and conceptions of self. Thus one is naturally protected from the afflictions. This is the unique object of abandonment in tantra - these stains.
- Practice the future result now. Although the goal and the view are the same as the Perfection vehicle, the method is different.
- Vajra/adamantine vehicle - the way one applies the antidotes. Indivisible union of wisdom realising emptiness and compassion (deity's body).
- Many skilful methods, use everything on the path, so complete the path much quicker.
- The distinct benefits of a "life-vidyadhara" - ordinary accomplishments (extending one's lifespan, clairvoyance), receive blessing of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and we can quickly complete the bodhisattva's practices. If we practice HYT, this can be done "in one short lifetime of a being of a degenerate age, from the first initial practice of tantra until the attainment of buddhahood."

Class 2 – Foundation of Tantra

Foundation of the Three Principal Aspects of the Path

- Buddha taught tantra on a foundation of the 3PA's – this is what makes it virtuous. We need to be a Buddhist to practice tantra. This means we need the foundation of 3 Principal Aspects of the Path. Without this, our practice becomes pseudo tantra.
- Without renunciation we continue to cycle in samsara, is crucial so we are not distracted by the explosion of blissful energy. Without it, tantra will just bind us tighter to samsara.
- Without bodhicitta there is a danger that we will not end up becoming a buddha. The bodhicitta motivation is the only reason to do these practices. Based on equanimity. No danger in this practice of love and compassion. Anyone can do it.
- What actually cuts the root of samsara is the correct view. This is what makes tantra buddhist, the view of the non-inherently existent I. Without this we will hold everything to be inherently existent, and continue to identify with the limited view we have of ourselves.

Qualities of a student

- Most importantly the mind of the student must accord with the lama. If we are in doubt, ask the lama's advice.
- We must wish to be liberated, and be unable to bare the sufferings of others. We must want to keep the vows and samayas, have stable faith in tantra, and have trained in the foundation of the 3PA's. Also, be prepared to make the commitments and actually request the initiation.

Qualities of a teacher

- It is crucial to investigate the lama before the initiation, because afterwards is too late, then we have to view them as the buddha. If we have made a mistake – view it as a lesson from the buddha – view their faults as one's own mistaken projections. Don't criticise, respect them.
- Put in some effort and investigate for yourself – look at their disciple's, at the lama's conduct, what other lamas say about them, what their lineage is, what tradition.
- Must have all the qualities of sutra master plus tantric requirements: have more qualities than faults, be a lineage holder, having attained empowerment and completed the retreat, be abiding in the vows and have permission from the deity (or not be opposed by the deity).

Class 5 – Three Gates to Enter Tantra

Three gates to enter tantra

- These 3 gates are our license to practice! We must pass through the first 2 in order to pass through the third - like a medieval castle with a moat.

First Gate is Refuge

- Refuge is the entry to the Buddha's teachings. Practices taught are renunciation and correct view. This makes it a Buddhist practice.
- When given? As a short separate ceremony (only time lay vows given). Also at the beginning of an initiation. We should do every day anyway, as we hold them for life!
- The commitments include - to rely on holy beings and practice the Dharma, take as many of the 5 vows as you can keep, be compassionate towards others, offer food and drink to the triple gem, make 3 prostrations morning and night.
- The lay vows are to avoid killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, intoxicants - and are taken for this lifetime. Know what constitutes a break/downfall, how to confess and purify, and retake when can.
- Avoid having a main refuge other than Buddha, harming living beings, negative company. Practice seeing statues as the actual Buddha, and don't discriminate gold from wood. Regard even one syllable as holy Dharma, don't put it on the floor. Sangha as actual Sangha, don't be biased or discriminatory, and don't step on their robes.

The second gate is Bodhicitta

- The entry to the Mahayana vehicle. The practices are the 6 Perfections.
- We have either aspirational bodhicitta - to never forsake the wish to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all. Engaging bodhicitta is when we take the actual 18 root and 46 auxiliary vows and then practice the conduct of a bodhisattva. The vows are like street signs, pointing out what to practice and what avoid on the path.
- We must remember what they are, understand how to guard them and purify broken ones, recite bodhicitta prayer, and never give up on people who harm us.
- The vows are given during the initiation, or as a separate ceremony. We hold them in this and all future lives until we reach enlightenment.

Third gate is Empowerment

- The entry to mantra. Unlike the other 2 gates, one is not born a suitable vessel, but needs to be made into one by empowerment from a qualified lama. Practices containing desire and the bodhisattva practices (deity practice).
- Historically spend 12 years preparing, nowadays we collect initiations like collecting coins! If in doubt, wait. GTT advises to practice caution when it comes to tantra.
- One takes Refuge, and either aspiring or engaging Bodhisattva vows (18 root, 46 secondary). There may also be commitments for a daily mantra recitation, daily sadhana, approach practice (retreat). In HYT there are additional tantric vows, samayas of the 5 Buddha Families, 6 session Guru Yoga each day, sadhana each day, tsog offering twice a month, and self-initiation after completing the retreat.

Class 6 – Four Classes of Tantra

Taking desire onto the path

- Ordinary and enlightened desire are directly opposed to one another. It is not pleasure per se that is the problem, but the grasping at it.
- In sutra we avoid worldly pleasure, but tantra emphasises the effectiveness of enjoyment. Desire as an energy force is used as fuel to propel us to the highest destination of enlightenment.
- How does this work? By first making desire manifest, we can experience bliss. By conjoining this bliss with the correct view one can eliminate attachment. Lama Yeshe said "the function of tantra is to transform all pleasures into the transcendental experience of deep penetrative awareness."
- We long for union with the perfect man or woman, but remain constantly unfulfilled. As long as our energies are fragmented and unbalanced we will remain desperate for the company of others, and incapable of being satisfied. Tantra provides methods for getting in touch with our essential wholeness. This is represented in tantric art as the sexual embrace.
- Relationships activate bliss, but it is an approximation and an unreliable method. We end up dissatisfied and unfulfilled. Meditation on a deity also activates bliss, but it goes straight to the source, it is more powerful, has no side effects, it is unlimited and sustainable – because the mind is infinite, and this is an enlightened energy.

Analogies illustrating taking desire on the path

- Tantra doesn't take desire or attachment as such (a wrong mind), but the bliss that arises from desire, as the path. The goal is not to increase attachment, but remove afflictions.
- Tantra is likened to a bug born within wood that gradually consumes the wood (desire consumes desire). It is also likened to a powerful medicine, a vaccine; a poison mixed with medicine to cure disease (desire counteracts desire).

Four classes of tantra

- For those unable to take desire onto the path, the perfection vehicle serves to separate them from attachment, with methods free of attachment. For tantric disciples these are the practices containing desire. Categorised by the capacity of the disciple to take bliss onto the path without getting into trouble.
- There are 4 classes of tantra – action tantra, performance tantra, yoga tantra and highest yoga tantra. In the west the most prevalent are action tantra and HYT.
- The 4 classes of tantra are distinguished in terms of the strength of the bliss and the difficulty in using it. How much can we use without getting overwhelmed? Depends on the strength of one's motivation (renunciation and bodhicitta).
- Like being a teenager and putting up posters of rock stars. Quite happy to gaze at them, but if met them would fall apart! Action tantra takes the bliss of merely gazing; performance tantra takes the bliss of gazing and smiling back and forth. Action tantra takes these 2 plus the bliss of holding hands. HYT takes all of these and the bliss of sexual union.

Class 7 – Four Complete Results of a Buddha

The 4 buddha bodies

- Four buddha bodies - the dharmakaya (mind) and rupakaya (body). Not separate, but unified, simultaneous. Bodies as in 'corpus' - collections - much broader connotation.
- Two aspects to the mind of a buddha: Wisdom truth body (jnana dharmakaya), the omniscient mind itself. The entity of the mind that has been purified. Substantial cause is meditations on wisdom realising emptiness with renunciation (and bodhicitta)
- Wisdom nature body (svabhavikakaya) the nature of the buddha's mind, the thusness. The clear light nature of a buddha's omniscience. No cause, is permanent. True Cessations within that mind; "lack of dirt" is increasing, not a mind as such.
- Two aspects of the form of a buddha, manifesting for the benefit of others:
Enjoyment body (sambhogakaya) resplendent body of light, ordinary beings cannot see. Has the marks of a buddha and teaches only Mahayana. Also seed syllables (vajra speech). Substantial cause is meditation on the body of the deity, making offerings.
- Emanation body (nirmanakaya) the personality of a buddha manifesting according to the need and level - GSB as monk, bridges, dogs. Substantial cause is meditating on the body of the deity, especially emanate and absorb lights.

The 4 complete results of a buddha and their causes

- The 2 kayas are not 2 separate things, but completely unified. Wherever there is the mind of the buddha there is the body of a buddha. Both need substantial causes. One cannot achieve the dharmakaya without attaining the rupakaya simultaneously! The perfection vehicle has methods similar in aspect to the wisdom body of a buddha, but it does not have deity yoga, so one doesn't develop the form of a buddha. So one cannot attain buddhahood through the practice of the perfection vehicle alone (!).
- The 4 meditations and 4 complete results of a buddha are the substantial causes for the rupakaya. Meditations unique to the tantra vehicle, can only do with an initiation.
- Meditations on the mandala and hosts of deities are cause for the abode/environment of a buddha. Visualising one's own body appearing as the deity is the cause for the form body of a buddha. Making tantric offerings is a cause for the resources of a buddha. Emanating and absorbing lights is the cause for the spontaneous and effortless activity of a buddha - liberating sentient beings.

Visualisation

- We visualise all the time, so may as well take creativity onto the path! The visualised deity is a reflection of our own latent buddha nature, so don't worry if it seems fake - it is no more fake than the current limited view we have of reality!
- Build your visualisation up step by step. Start with a rough idea/sketch, slowly fill in each detail (first get a hand clear). Over time the whole visualisation will manifest. The description directs the mind; so make effort to recall the meaning, significance. Use an internal Q&A dialogue to do this.
- Visualising light rays and purification has a powerful effect on our nervous system, so we can use this to rapidly transform our ordinary appearances and conceptions.

Class 8 – Path of Action Tantra

Gathering the 2 accumulations

- In Sutra the 2 accumulations are gathered separately. In Mantra the 2 accumulations are gathered simultaneously, so attaining enlightenment is that much quicker. In the 3 lower classes of tantra one meditates on yoga with signs and yoga without signs.
- Like putting on blue glasses to look at a snow mountain. Even though the snow looks blue, we know it is actually white. From the side of appearance the mountain is blue; from the side of ascertainment the mountain is white. Both aspects simultaneously.
- Yoga with signs: Meditate solely on the deity, but sustained by emptiness. Cultivate divine pride (identifying with the deity) and clear appearance (halting ordinary perceptions and conceptions) to develop calm abiding. "Meditative stabilisation of non-conceptual bliss and clarity". Bliss (mental and physical pliancy from calm abiding). Clarity (deity appearance). Non-conceptual (concentration meditation).
- Yoga without signs: Meditate primarily on emptiness, using analytical and placement meditation in equal measure. United meditation on emptiness and deity yoga is "non-dual yoga of profundity and clarity". Non-dual (2 accumulations simultaneously). Profound (emptiness). Clarity (deity and mandala). Purpose is to achieve insight.

Structure of a sadhana

- A sadhana practice has a beginning, middle and end, ensuring a complete result.
- In the preliminary practices, the most important is guru yoga. In the actual practice, the most important is meditating on emptiness, stabilising clear appearance and divine pride, and mantra recitation. The most important concluding rites are the tormas offerings and prayer of the path.

Types of offerings and their purpose

- Mandala offerings: Don't need an initiation. Made to the lama, the buddhas, the front and self generations, for the purpose of receiving material and spiritual wealth.
- Tantric offerings: argham, padyam etc, must be blessed by a deity (must have an initiation to bless them), but everyone present can then offer them. In nature of emptiness, made of light, and function to bestow special great/uncontaminated bliss. Offered to both self and front generations, to receive the resources of a buddha.
- Tormas: offer to the wisdom beings (front generation), to receive accomplishments.

Self-generation by means of 6 deities

- The self-generation process is the same in all action tantra sadhanas, even if it is not explicitly stated.
- By meditating on the empty deity, from within emptiness we arise as the sound deity, then the syllable deity. This is the foundation.
- The actual self-generation is the form deity. To complete the self-generation we have the deity of mudra. In the deity of sign we meditate one-pointedly on clear appearance and divine pride, with a progressively finer and more subtle focus.

Class 9 – Path of Highest Yoga Tantra

Basis of samsara and nirvana

- HYT has meditations similar in aspect to death, intermediate state and rebirth. The aim is to gain control over this process.
- There are 2 stages of practice - generation stage (the rehearsal) and completion stage (in which we actually arise as the deity).
- The human body is a unique vehicle to attain enlightenment in this lifetime. It has everything we need in the body/mind complex. Thus it is not just the basis of samsara, but the basis of nirvana also. Whether we go up or down is our choice.

Generation stage

- In generation stage, we take death onto the path to actualise the dharmakaya. Meditations on emptiness arrest ordinary appearances and conceptions.
- Taking the intermediate state onto the path through the power of aspirational prayer, one arises from within emptiness into the sambhogakaya (seed syllable).
- Having done so, in order to accomplish the well-being of others, one arises into the complete form of the deity - the nirmanakaya, bringing rebirth onto the path.

Completion stage

- In completion stage, we gain control over our internal wind energy and direct it where we chose, causing the fundamental mind of clear light to dawn. Eventually this will enable us to manifest the illusory body.
- Imperative we follow the instructions! Otherwise is dangerous, a cause for suffering.
- When one attains enlightenment one's body and mind become inseparable. When the union of body and mind is attained, we manifest the illusory body and clear light.

Union of bliss and emptiness

- The tantric personality uses the experience of great bliss constructively, to generate the mind penetrating wisdom. This is the quickest path to enlightenment.
- Indivisible bliss and emptiness occurs when the fundamental mind becomes a blissful entity and takes emptiness as its object.

Guru devotion

- Without guru devotion, realisations are impossible. In Sutra we see the guru as being like the buddha, but in Tantra we see them as the buddha. Why? For our own benefit.
- We identify with an unbroken lineage all the way back to the buddha. The guru is the living example of these teachings, and kinder than all the buddhas.
- Relative guru is the external teacher. Inner guru is our own inner wisdom, our own clarity of mind. Guru yoga draws us closer to this inner guru. The more in touch with our own wisdom we are, the more profound our understanding of the teachings will be.
- We need to work on it. Take their advice, put the teachings into practice. Cultivate faith and respect, by recognising their great kindness. Practice the 9 attitudes recommended by Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

Class 10 – Setting up a Retreat

Setting up a retreat

- The approach retreat (drawing us closer to the deity) can be numerical (100,000 mantras minimum) or sign (vision or dream from the deity). If you have an initiation, better to do deity retreat combined with lam rim study, rather than just lam rim.
- Practice in 4 sessions (pre-dawn, before noon, afternoon, after sunset). The pre-dawn session is the time of enlightenment! With-out this session, it is not an approach retreat. Can do just dawn session, 1st and 4th, or break day sessions into 4 short ones.
- Ask GTT, for a good day to start. Create merit before you start, do prostrations, recite Heart Sutra, offer to the sangha, save lives. Have nice, clean offerings.
- Pick a place where you will not be disturbed. Clean the room, set up the altar with offering bowls, tormas, image of the deity. Set up your table with bell and dorje, sadhana, mandala. Set up your seat with swastika, kusha and durva grass. Generate the boundary marker, who you can talk to and when (email and phone rules, hospital).
- Start the retreat the evening before, by offering gektor and tormas and blessing the seat, thinking "I won't move until I am finished" After sundown do the entire sadhana. End on the morning of the last day. Leave 2-3 days to organise the fire puja.
- During the retreat, keep healthy and clean, bless your food, do prostrations, guru yoga in the morning. Most important is to meditate on emptiness and recite the mantra correctly. In the breaks read what is relevant, paint images of the deity, recite the guru's name mantra, do your other commitments. Abandon all conceptions of what is good and what is bad. See all objects and experiences as the deity.

Mantra recitation

- Coarse recitation focuses on the reverberation of the sound of the mantra. Subtle recitation consists of mental recitation, seeing each syllable individually. Extremely subtle is concentration abiding in fire and sound (not relying on recitation) where the sound is simultaneous. Do not get them mixed up!
- Mantra commitment utilises verbal recitation. 8 ways to recite: Not too fast or slow (enunciate each syllable, lips moving). Not too loud or soft (collar can hear but shoulder can't). No talking, wandering mind, or changing the sound of the syllables.
- Hold mala at your heart, don't drink during recitation. Subtract a number if burp, sneeze, yawn, fart etc. Can only count the mantras done during the session.

Ensuring success in the practice

- To ensure success in our practice, cultivate 4 things. First, indestructible devotion and confidence in what we are doing. How? By clearly understanding the path.
- Second, be free from doubt. We cannot progress with an indecisive mind. Understand the meaning and purpose of the practice.
- Third we must be single-pointed. If we lack stability and focus it is impossible to effectively practice. Cultivate discipline.
- Lastly, keep these powerful methods for protecting the mind secret! Proud or boasting behaviour only attracts hindrances to our practice.