

# Breath of the Dakinis: Some Notes on Receiving Teachings

by Lama Jampa Thaye

Dharma teachings are given so that we can advance along the path to buddhahood. It is therefore of great importance to understand the significance and context of the various ways in which teachings are presented. These notes have been written to answer the types of question commonly asked by people embarking upon dharma practice.

## *The Teacher*

In Buddhism, a teacher (guru/lama) is someone who bestows upon us the precious means for obtaining enlightenment. These means consist of the vows, initiations, reading transmissions and instructions which constitute the full range of Buddha's teachings. The teacher must have been given permission by his own master to bestow each of these upon students. For further details on the qualifications which a teacher should possess, one should ask for transmission and explanation of texts such as Tsarchen Losal Gyamtso's commentary on *The Fifty Verses on the Lama*.

## *Taking Refuge*

We become Buddhists through participating in the ceremony of refuge. Before asking a teacher to give refuge, we should have decided that the Three Jewels - consisting of the Buddha, the dharma (the teachings) and the sangha (community) - provide the best means of refuge, since Buddha's teaching surpasses that of any other religious teacher. For this reason, once we have taken refuge in the Three Jewels, we should not take refuge in any other religion nor blend Buddhism and other religions.

The refuge ceremony begins when we enter the shrine room making three prostrations to the lama and the Three Jewels. The teacher may then recite various prayers while we sit before him, and perhaps give a brief explanation of some of the points concerning refuge. We recite after him three times the verses of taking refuge in the Three Jewels and ask to be accepted as a lay follower from this day forward. The lama will then ask three times, "Have you understood the method?" and we answer, "Yes", each time. The lama will subsequently cut a small lock of hair from our head to symbolise our entry into dharma and will then give us a refuge name. The ceremony concludes with the prayers for dedication of merit and for the increase of auspicious conditions. These prayers of dedication express the wish that all the benefits that arise out of taking refuge will spread outwards to those around us and, ultimately, to all sentient beings. Finally, we make an offering to the lama before we leave the shrine room.

Having taken refuge, from then on we repeat the verses of taking refuge in the lama and the Three Jewels at the start of each meditation session and we recite prayers of dedication of merit at its conclusion.

### ***Bodhisattva Vow***

Through taking refuge we become Buddhists. Through taking the bodhisattva vow which represents the commitment to become a Buddha for the benefit of all beings, we become followers of the mahayana. Before taking this vow we will usually have heard teachings on the bodhichitta, the thought of enlightenment, and will have confidence that the mahayana teachings provide means to develop bodhichitta ourselves, as countless men and women have done before us. We take this vow with our teacher, reciting verses composed by Shantideva:

*Just as the previous Buddhas gave birth to bodhichitta and just as they successively dwelt in the bodhisattva practices, likewise for the sake of all beings, I give birth to bodhichitta and likewise shall successively follow the practices.*

### ***Initiations***

Within the vast and numerous mahayana teachings which Buddha gave to his disciples, we can distinguish two categories, and these are known technically as the *way of the perfections* and the *way of the mantras*, often called the vajrayana. These are two ways to travel to the same destination of buddhahood with the same altruistic motivation of bodhichitta. That is why, at the beginning of any vajrayana initiation, we make the bodhisattva vow in an abbreviated form.

Initiation is the gateway to vajrayana practice. An initiation confers upon one the requisite power to accomplish buddhahood through meditation upon a particular Buddha deity. The lama who bestows the initiation must himself have previously received the initiation from an unbroken lineage and have completed either a major retreat on the deity of the initiation or a major deity practice from the particular order of tantra to which the initiation belongs. A major retreat is one in which the full number of mantra recitations required in a particular deity practice is accomplished.

Though people in general use the term '*initiation*' or '*empowerment*' quite loosely nowadays, there are actually different kinds of initiations bestowed in vajrayana. One should distinguish between *permissions* (rjes-s nang) and *empowerments* (dbang-skur) both of which are found in all four orders of tantra: kriya, charya, yoga and anuttarayoga.

In a *permission* the lama blesses our body, speech and mind so that we can cultivate identification with these three aspects of the buddha-deity of the initiation. Common examples of this are the initiations of Manjushri and Chenrezik-mahamudra. In an *empowerment* the actual power or energy of the deity is conferred upon us through the ritual objects of the initiation. In an anuttara-tantra empowerment one is led into a *mandala*, the palace of the buddha-deity, and then the four anuttara empowerments -

named 'vase', 'secret', 'wisdom' and 'fourth' - are conferred upon us. Common examples of this are the initiations of Hevajra and Chakrasamvara. In the Sakya tradition, the *blessing-initiation* (byin-rlabs), authorising us to meditate on the buddha-goddess Vajrayogini, may be bestowed subsequent to such major initiations.

Although there is such a difference between various kinds of initiation, it is still possible to indicate at least the general outlines of an initiation. Firstly the lama must make his own preparations for the initiation. Then, having purified ourselves by rinsing our mouths, we enter the shrine room and prostrate three times to the lama. We are then given rice to use later in making symbolic offerings. Once we are seated, the lama will instruct us to generate the intention to receive the initiation for the benefit of all beings and will then proceed to relate the history of the initiation's transmission lineage and the benefits of the initiation itself. Following this one makes an offering of the entire universe as represented by rice, in order to receive the initiation. We then repeat the prayer requesting the granting of the initiation and the seven-limbed prayer which includes the taking of refuge and the Bodhisattva vow.

The main part of the initiation is structured differently depending upon whether it is a 'permission' or an 'empowerment' initiation and according to the level of tantra to which it belongs. Throughout this phase of the initiation we must maintain the conviction that the teacher is identical with the initiation-deity.

In the concluding part of the initiation, we declare our commitment to accomplish the practice of the deity and promise to carry out the instructions of the lama by reciting the following verses:

*As the master instructs, so I will do.*

*From this time forward, I offer myself as your disciple.*

*Please accept me as your student and use me in any part of your holy work.*

We then offer once more a symbolic mandala of the universe to demonstrate our gratitude. The initiation subsequently finishes with the whole assembly making the prayers of dedication of merit.

As we leave the shrine room we make an offering to our lama which signifies our appreciation of his kindness and willingness to support him. This offering is a direct reflection of the value we place upon the initiation and we should make the greatest offering our means permit.

### ***Reading Transmissions***

To be able to carry out the actual meditation-practice of the deity of the initiation we must receive the reading transmission (lung) of the actual practice from our teacher. This takes the form of the teacher reciting the words of the text to us, conveying the blessing of the lineage through which the teaching has been transmitted. Although in vajrayana

one must receive reading transmission for any text one wishes to study or practice, in the sutra teachings this is not considered to be quite as necessary. However, the reading transmission for many sutra texts still exists and it is certainly beneficial to receive such transmissions since it nurtures our realisation.

### ***Instructions***

The third category of vajrayana teaching following initiation and reading transmission is instruction (khrid) in the actual techniques contained in the meditation practice. In many, though not all, cases such instructions are now in the form of commentaries based on the discourses of great masters of the lineage.

*Written by the layman Jampa Thaye on the 10th Day, sacred to Guru Padmasambhava, of the first month of the Water Monkey Year (14th March, 1992) in order to provide some guidance for people new to Dharma.*

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