

The Five Buddha Families

Transcription of a talk by Lama Jampa Thaye

‘In the major initiations of the yoga and anuttara sets of tantras we are initiated into the mandala of the five Buddha families. In the anuttara tantra there are other initiations that follow within the major initiation but that of the five Buddha families is the basis of the whole ritual.

‘The reason why we receive this initiation into the five Buddha families is that through this initiation and subsequent sadhana practice, our five skandhas, the five aggregates of our body and mind, are ripened into the five Buddhas. The reason this can happen is that the seed of those five Buddha families exists intrinsically within the skandhas already: these five skandhas represent the samsaric aspect of reality and the five Buddhas represent the nirvanic aspect of reality.

‘The samsara perspective and the nirvana perspective are actually inseparable and always have been. The fundamental nature of mind, which is the basis of all reality, is the union of luminosity, or clarity, and emptiness. The appearances which we now describe as samsaric derive from the luminous aspect of mind and nirvana itself is simply emptiness or the ultimate nature of mind.

‘At the moment we see all manifestations of the nature of mind distorted through our impure karmic vision. When we look at ourselves and others, we see these five impure aggregates or skandhas: form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. If we saw things as a Buddha sees them, with a nirvanic vision, we would see that these five skandhas, which make up our personality and the world around us, are actually the five Buddhas. There is a relationship – a correspondence – between the five skandhas and the five Buddhas. Along with that, therefore, there is a relationship or correspondence with the five disturbing emotions, which are possessed by ordinary sentient beings with karmic vision, and the five transcendental wisdoms which are possessed by a Buddha who has pure vision. When we’re led into a yoga or anuttara tantra mandala, the lama bestows on us these five successive initiations for the five Buddha families and at the same time the disturbing emotion that corresponds to each of these families is transformed into the appropriate transcendental wisdom.

‘Just as each skandha is intrinsically a Buddha, each Buddha family has an element associated with it and that element in its intrinsically pure form is the consort of the Buddha.

‘**The first initiation** is the water initiation and that takes place on our skandha of consciousness. When the nectar or water of the initiation vase is bestowed upon us, this fifth skandha is transformed into Buddha Akshobya. This is the first correspondence or identity.

‘What we now see, through impure karmic vision, as the skandha of ego consciousness is transformed into Buddha Akshobya and with that the disturbing emotion of anger is transformed or ripened to become the mirror-like wisdom. The first Buddha family is called the Vajra family and right now, in ourselves, the Vajra

family manifests as the skandha of consciousness and the disturbing emotion of hatred.

‘However, if we saw this anger from a nirvanic perspective, or how it truly is, we would see that its actual nature is the mirror-like wisdom. Anger can be said to be a frozen form of the mirror-like wisdom. If you think of the analogy of water, water in its natural state is limpid and clear and reflects everything without partiality but when it becomes frozen, it becomes hard and solid and does not reflect anything. Similarly consciousness, in its natural state, is all-reflective, it simply reflects all phenomena as they are. When it becomes frozen and hard through the presence of ignorance, then it takes on this hard, sharp, unreflective aspect which we call anger.

‘Anger has some kind of intelligence in it. It sees something about the situation but reacts in a very negative and self-centred way, whereas if that anger is relaxed, it becomes this all-reflective mirror-like wisdom which is totally impartial. The first initiation transforms or ripens the disturbing emotion of anger to become the mirror-like wisdom and at the same time the skandha of consciousness is ripened to become the Buddha Akshobya.

‘Akshobya is the chief Buddha. His name means “imperturbable” or “unshakeable”. He is blue coloured and is the Buddha of the Vajra family. The wisdom of the Vajra family is the mirror-like wisdom. The skandha is consciousness and the disturbing emotion is anger.

‘The element of water, which exists within us as a certain energy, is transformed or ripened to become Mamaki who is the consort of Akshobya.

‘**The second initiation** is the crown initiation where the crown is bestowed upon us. This belongs to the Jewel family, the second Buddha family. The initiation takes place on our skandha of feeling or sensation which transforms into Buddha Ratnasambhava or “Jewel Born One”. His wisdom is the wisdom of equality and represents the transformation or maturation of the disturbing emotion of pride. This Buddha family indicates wealth or richness and when this sense of richness is freed from egotism, it manifests as Buddha Ratnasambhava. In other words, it manifests as the appreciation of the equal value of all phenomena and a sense of total richness in all phenomena and all beings. When this is associated with ego-clinging, richness is associated with pride: “I have more wealth, I am more valuable than others.” When this is relaxed or matured through the initiation and subsequent practice, it becomes the transcendental wisdom of equality.

‘This is the second or crown initiation and we can clearly see why the crown is the appropriate ritual object for this.

‘The earth element which exists within us as an energy, is ripened to become Luccana, consort of Ratnasambhava.

‘**The third initiation** is the initiation of the vajra. This is confusing because although it belongs to the lotus family, the ritual object that’s used is the vajra, a vajra is placed

in our right hand. The skandha that it takes place on is the third one, the skandha of perception and this is matured through the initiation, into Buddha Amitabha, who is the chief deity of the lotus family. The disturbing emotion that is transformed or purified is desire and this becomes the discriminating wisdom. Desire has a naïve type of discrimination about it. It sees the qualities in things but it sees them through the prism of self-centredness. In other words it desires to grasp things that it sees as beautiful.

‘When that is relaxed through initiation and subsequent practice, the appreciation of beauty becomes free from ego-clinging and it sees the individual particular qualities in all phenomena. It sees individual qualities but it doesn’t grasp onto them. It is therefore called the discriminating wisdom and we can see how this ties in with the third skandha of perception because perception is that which names things. It says, “This is this, that is that.” When that skandha is freed from any self-centredness it becomes Buddha Amitabha, embodiment of the discriminating wisdom.

‘The element of fire which exists within us as a certain energy, is transformed into the Pandaravasini, consort of Amitabha.

‘**The fourth initiation** is the initiation of the bell. The bell is given into our left hand and that is the initiation for the action or activity Buddha family and the skandha which is ripened is the skandha of mental formations. This skandha becomes the lord of the activity family, the Buddha Amogāsiddhi, which means “all-accomplishing power”.

‘The disturbing emotion which is being transformed is jealousy, competitiveness or envy and this is transformed into the transcendental all-accomplishing wisdom. Jealousy is connected with actions because it’s comparing oneself or one’s achievements or actions with those of others. It has an impulse to act, to create or form something but it sees it through the prism of “How am I comparing with others?” When that neurosis is relaxed through the initiation and subsequent practice, the impulse to act is selfless and therefore becomes the all-fulfilling wisdom. It fulfils whatever is necessary but without any reference to self interest.

‘The wind element which exists within us as an energy is transformed into Samayātara who is the consort of Amogāsiddhi.

‘**The fifth initiation** is called the name initiation because there’s no ritual object. Instead you are given a secret name or, if you’ve been given one already, you remember it. The skandha is form, the body, and this is transformed to become Buddha Vairocana. His name means the Bright or Shining One and the wisdom of this fifth family or Tathagata family is the all-encompassing wisdom. The disturbing emotion which is transformed is ignorance.

‘Ignorance has a sense of boundlessness about it but prefers to ignore boundlessness. It is frightened of boundlessness. It ignores space and instead tries to restrict itself and its vision so that it’s not overcome by this vast spaciousness. This ties in with the sense of the body because we use our body as a way of giving ourselves a solidity to

defend ourselves against space. When that is relaxed through the initiation and subsequent practice, then the skandha of form becomes Buddha Vairochana who sees all things with his all-pervading wisdom. Ignorance becomes the all-pervasive or dharmadhatu wisdom.

‘The space element, which exists within us as a certain energy, is transformed to become Vajradhatisvari the queen of vajra space who is the consort of Vairochana.

‘Those are the five initiations that form a part of the first of the four initiations in anuttara tantra: vase (which includes those five plus the vajra disciple and vajra master initiation), secret, wisdom, and word. In yoga tantra initiations there’s only the vase initiation, including these five initiations plus those of the vajra disciple and the vajra master.

‘That is why the eighth root downfall is to despise the body or the other skandhas as impure. If you do that, you contradict what has been revealed to you in the major initiations, which is that your five skandhas are intrinsically the five Buddhas.’

The Five Skandhas or Aggregates

‘**The skandha of form:** that which has shape and form (including dream imagery).

‘**The skandha of feelings or sensations:** feelings of pleasure, displeasure, indifference.

‘**The skandha of perception:** naming these sensations. This results in the experience of one’s sensations becoming more solid in one’s mind through the application of a label.

‘**The skandha of formations:** these are associations or mental functions. There are virtuous and non-virtuous mental functions. Altogether, there are 51 of these. They are not fully conscious but they are associations that occur when we are experiencing a sense object.

‘**The skandha of consciousness:** consciousness here specifically means ‘that which finally sees the completed object.’ In the five skandhas, form is everything physical and all the other four are a part of mental activity.

‘If we consider a glass, for example, as soon as its solid shape impacts on my hand, I have a feeling of pleasure or displeasure or indifference and my mind immediately notices that. Noticing that feeling is called perception and, alongside that, there is an association probably filtered through memory: I have desire or anger or indifference towards it. When I finally see the object, in this case the glass, that is called the fifth skandha.

‘The fifth skandha is like the thread that strings together all these previous four factors and tells me what I’m seeing. The second, third, fourth, and fifth skandhas are all mental and three of them – feelings, perceptions, and formations – are, in a way,

subconscious. They are subconscious in the sense that they shape the way I finally distinguish something and become conscious of it. When I finally see ‘there’s a glass in front of me’ that is the fifth skandha filtered through the presence of the other skandhas.

‘Everything that arises from causes and conditions can be grouped in the five skandhas. There is nothing other than that. They are a complete itinerary of the physical and mental world. From a Hinayana view, the whole world is comprised of the five skandhas. From a Mahayana point of view, all of this is empty. In Vajrayana it is said that one’s body and mind are the Buddha and the five skandhas are the Five Buddhas.

‘Knowledge of the five skandhas helps us to slow down and makes us think about what constitutes our perception of phenomena. Lord Buddha often said that we should look at our skandhas to see where the self is. When we are doing analytic meditation on the self and we ask whether there a self in the body or the mind, we can use the five skandhas as a more precise definition of what the body and mind are.

‘Ultimately, from our point of view, there are no skandhas; they are simply a category. For example, if I look at this table without any analysis at all, I see it as one solid thing. If I look at it more closely, I see that it’s actually made up of different parts which have come together. If I look at it really deeply, I see that there’s not anything there at all. The second view (of seeing its parts) is equivalent to the skandhas.

‘When we begin, we might think that there is form on one side and emptiness on the other, a superficial reality as opposed to a deeper reality. However if emptiness is the real truth of everything that exists, then it is manifesting now. All individual appearances are nothing more than the manifestation of emptiness. We can use the analogy of a wave on top of water. We might see the wave as separate from the water but the water isn’t anything different from the wave. It is merely manifesting as the wave. Vajrayana enables us to use everything about visible reality and, rather than to reject it or to attain some higher emptiness beyond it, to see that emptiness is actually in everything already.’

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