

## Research Article

*Journal of Global Buddhism 8 (2007): 81 - 106*



### *A Strand of Contemporary Tantra: Its Discourse and Practice in the FPMT*

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## *A Strand of Contemporary Tantra: Its Discourse and Practice in the FPMT*

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### Abstract

This paper utilizes the data obtained from fieldwork conducted at Vajrayana Institute, a Buddhist centre affiliated with the worldwide Gelugpa Tibetan Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), to explore the approach to and practice of Tantra in a contemporary Western Buddhist context. In particular, this paper highlights the seriousness with which Tantra is treated in this religious setting, challenging Urban's statement, largely based on his examination of the Western appropriation of Hindu Tantra, that the West has appropriated Tantra as a form of spiritual hedonism. The paper describes the orientation toward Tantric activity within the FPMT by outlining its relationship to the following aspects of religious activity: to sutra study and practice, ethical training and the Mahayana motivation, the role of taking refuge, and to the purpose of initiation and keeping Tantric commitments.

### Article

In his book *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, (1) Urban makes two statements about the nature of Tantra as a religious phenomenon. First, he states that Tantra cannot be viewed as a unitary religious phenomenon, and second, that its appropriation by modern Western culture is largely as a form of spiritual hedonism. There is scholarly agreement with Urban's first point; Wayman and Guenther both distinguish between Hindu and Buddhist Tantra (2). With respect to Urban's second point, Tantra as spiritual hedonism, it is significant that his book reflects

an emphasis on the appropriation of Hindu Tantra by the West (3). If we are to take Urban's direction, and view Tantra as 'a shifting category, to be understood in terms of its embodied forms: specific forms of discourse, ritual acts, and its expression by historical actors, and in its specific lived, social, and historical contexts,' then we must be mindful of differences between its Hindu and Buddhist manifestations in the West. Samuel comments that by the late 1990s Tibetan Buddhism in the West was characterized by a strong emphasis on tradition, a puritanical atmosphere at *dharma* group meetings, and no sexuality except for the imagery (4). These are in line with my own observations of Tibetan Buddhism as it is practiced within the *Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition* (FPMT), founded in 1975, a worldwide Tibetan Buddhist organization of the Gelugpa Tibetan lineage (5), and its affiliated centre, Vajrayana Institute, in Sydney, Australia.

An exploration of the salient characteristics of Tantric activity at Vajrayana Institute will highlight the relationship between its Buddhist nature, and the seriousness with which it is treated in this religious setting. These characteristics emerge from a consideration of the relationship of Tantra to the following: to sutra study and practice, to the Mahayana motivation, to the act of taking refuge, to the purpose of initiation and maintenance of secrecy, to the purpose of deity visualization, and to practitioners' own approaches and experiences. Exploration of these facets of Tantric activity will show that Tantra's embodiment within the religious perspective of the FPMT and similar organizations must be seen and treated as distinct from Hindu-based Tantra in the West.

Both Buddhist scholars and Gelugpa lineage leaders see Tantra as a method for attaining enlightenment within the Mahayana view (6). While Buddhist Tantra is founded on intimate personal experience of reality as Guenther suggests (7), it is also founded on Mahayana Sutric study, practice, and orientation (8). Tsongkhapa, recognized as the founder of the Gelugpa lineage by the FPMT, delineates the Sutric and Tantric aspects of the path as cause and effect (9). Sutra is the causal vehicle; its practice accrues the positive merit needed to purify the mindstream in preparation for enlightenment, while

Tantra is the resultant vehicle. The result is taken into the path in the sense that one visualizes the end-result, oneself as a fully-enlightened deity, having the ultimate nature of emptiness. In the commentary to a *Medicine Buddha* initiation conducted in 2005, the Vajra master stated, “with Sutra you are an ordinary being, with Mantra oneself is the deity and the place itself is like the pure realm; the outcome is bringing on the path; enlightenment is involved in the moment of sitting” (10).

Within the FPMT, scriptural authority rests with the writings of the Gelugpa lineage leaders, and especially with those of its founder, Lama Tsongkhapa. Of his two seminal treatises, *The Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path*, the *Lam Rim*, and *The Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*, the teachings and practices of the FPMT are manifestly based on the former treatise, which outlines the characteristic Gelugpa presentation of the path to enlightenment and its stages (11). According to Cutler, all the books on the stages of the path from the Gelugpa perspective ‘published until now’ are derived from this work (12). *Lam Rim* texts divide the path to enlightenment into three scopes. The small scope is for those who wish to avoid a lower suffering rebirth in a future life, and gain a happy rebirth by learning to live in harmony with the law of karma. The medium scope is for those who desire to be free from *samsâra* by becoming familiar with the path to liberation, and being liberated from ignorance. The great scope is for those who adhere to the Mahayana motivation, also referred to as the *bodhicitta* (spirit of enlightenment) motivation, to attain the state of enlightenment to free all sentient beings from suffering (13).

This progression is mirrored in the three volumes of the *Lam Rim* edited by Cutler. The first volume deals with the concerns of the first two scopes, and prepares the practitioner for Mahayana practice by setting out the preliminary practices for the development of *bodhicitta* (14). The second volume is devoted to the motivation and practice of the *bodhisattva*, (15) which Cutler considers to be the heart of the treatise. The third volume deals with the theory and practice of concentration and insight, or calm-abiding and analytical meditation (16). According to the *Lam Rim*, one can meditate with

any one of the three motivations, but the three are progressive: each one lays foundations for the next (17). From the Mahayana perspective, the concerns of the Theravadin tradition would belong to the first two scopes, and the Mahayana's own, concerned with the path of the *bodhisattva*, to the third. Accordingly, teachings and practices at Vajrayana Institute contain those of the three scopes, but emphasize the concerns and goals of the great scope: development of compassion and equanimity, generation of *bodhicitta*, with the intention of attaining full enlightenment/Buddhahood to benefit all living beings. According to Tsongkhapa, this is the bodhisattva motivation (18).

Throughout the teaching curriculum at Vajrayana Institute two doctrines are continually referred to in order to reinforce the Mahayana practitioner's orientation toward the path: the six perfections of the bodhisattva, generosity, morality, patience, courage, meditation, and insight, and the three principal aspects of the path: renunciation, bodhicitta, and wisdom-realizing-emptiness. These are outlined and explained continuously throughout *Discovering Buddhism*, and in the more traditional style teachings given by the resident Geshe, which may be an afternoon teaching or a whole course (19). Teachings and conversation both emphasize the received wisdom that Tantric practice is the quick way to enlightenment if one has the correct motivation, and is properly prepared. The three principles, *renunciation*, *bodhicitta*, and *wisdom-realizing-emptiness*, tend to be taken on as values that orient practitioners on the path. Renunciation refers to renouncing the world as a source of gratification and happiness and the state of mind of attachment. *Bodhicitta* is the mind of enlightenment and universal compassion, while wisdom-realizing-emptiness is understanding and perceiving emptiness. During the commentary to the Medicine Buddha initiation in April 2005, it was stated that renunciation is a definite conviction; 'when one thinks about the suffering nature of *samsara*, one develops renunciation. When one experiences difficulty, one wants a way out of it; when one can see similar situations in others, one's motivation transforms slowly into *Bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta* is developed with the method of lovingkindness and compassion.' In Introduction to Tantra in 2004,

the Gates of Tantra were held to include the three principles, especially “absolutely flawless *bodhicitta* motivation”, and equanimity where there were no distinctions between friend, enemy, stranger (20).

Practitioners relate easily to the notions and practices of cultivating renunciation and *bodhicitta*. However, in my experience, it is hard for them to ground their practice in wisdom-realizing-emptiness; students struggle conceptually with the meaning of *sunyata*, emptiness, and treat it as an understanding that they will receive as a result of their right aspiration, when karmic conditions are right for the maturation of their understanding. The idea of receiving an understanding of emptiness after proper intellectual and experiential preparation is expressed by two practitioners. The first said:

I heard Lama Zopa teach last year and he was really clear about a few things that I’m not really clear about, like you have to understand the tenet systems if you want to refine your intellectual understanding of emptiness... You have to prepare for realizations about all that stuff (21).

The second gave a list of meditative attainments that are necessary in order to attain wisdom-realizing-emptiness:

To attain enlightenment you have to realize emptiness... You must have calm abiding as a prerequisite to *Vipassanā*, and mental pliancy through analysis... You have to have Lam Rim analysis, then you get to emptiness... You can’t do it without going through these steps (22).

During the Discovering Buddhism module *The Wisdom of Emptiness* in 2004, the teacher referred to this need for intellectual and experiential preparation, explaining that ‘wisdom-realizing-emptiness involves intellectual and experiential realization working together,’ and that ‘in order to perceive emptiness, one must develop meditative concentration first’ (23). During the same course, the teacher elaborated on the meaning of emptiness-of-self from two perspectives. The first, the self as the object to be refuted is the sense-of-self as the subject of formal analytical meditation. The second is the object we try to protect in

our everyday life, the sense of a permanent self which gives rise to anger, jealousy, attachments (24). Of these two senses-of-self, the latter is more experientially available in everyday life, and is consequently the subject of investigation and speculation by the students and practitioners I interacted with. On the last night of the course, the students were asked to give a *personal point of view*, a short report to the class outlining what we had obtained from the course. In response, most of those present noted that they felt less of a need to respond in negative or defensive ways to confronting or threatening situations. These responses conveyed the sense that the act of reflecting on the meaning of emptiness, gave the students an alternative way of viewing their own behavior and another strategic option to work with in their everyday life. The dominant reasoning was that if there is no permanent self to be attacked or hurt, then people didn't feel the need to find ways of defending themselves, for instance, retaliating with anger, and therefore felt more able to "let things go." These same people remarked that they were more able to meditate, and felt more motivated to do so (25). It is in this second sense that these students apply and work with the notion of emptiness-of-self, and this becomes an ongoing project of transformation. In terms of the three principals of the path, the desire for renunciation and the development of *bodhicitta*, and the ongoing project of the deconstruction of the reified ego become the focus of aspiration and practice for these practitioners.

The FPMT does not hold teachings or courses specifically on Tantra. The exception to this is the module *Introduction to Tantra* in Discovering Buddhism (26), the eighteen-month introductory course on Tibetan Buddhism. Of the fifteen modules each of four-to-five weeks' duration at one night a week, and each covering a specific topic, this module outlines the foundations of Tantra, especially in its relationship to Sutra practice. It is also designed to convey the seriousness with which Tantra is to be undertaken, without disclosing much detail about the nature of the practice itself. In discourse, it is emphasized that one must not get carried away with Tantra, that sutric study and practice serve as a foundation for progress on the path to enlightenment even when one becomes a Tantric practitioner. It is emphasized that while Sutra

uses lovingkindness and compassion, Tantra uses the energy of craving, desire and attachment. In this respect, Tantra is not in itself virtuous, and not essentially pure, it becomes pure with the right motivation.

The four classes of Tantra, Action, Performance, Yoga and Highest Yoga, are described briefly to outline how each class builds on the skills and knowledge acquired through practice of the one preceding it. Action Tantras use external things such as mudras and mantra recitation. One is helped to do the practice in this lowest class of Tantra by being connected with external things. The Dalai Lama draws attention to their emphasis on physical cleanliness (27). The teacher compared the energy used with the energy we use when smiling and laughing. In Action Tantra, meditation on the deity does not involve arising as the deity. Compared with the focus on external things in action Tantra, Performance Tantra concentrates more on mental activity, and begins to use the energy of desire (28). The teacher indicated this class to be concerned with visualizing the consort deity with desire, and arising as the deity, even if it is the opposite sex to ourselves. The third class, Yoga Tantra, involves visualizing the purification of body, speech, and mind. The meditation practice involves seeing the self as the deity informing all our acts. Highest Yoga Tantra was described as the system of highest possible development, where each deity has a subtle specialty. Not much was said about this class beyond its involving the generation and completion stages (29), and the systems of visualization to do with the *chakras*, winds and channels (30).

For reasons of secrecy, the teacher did not elaborate on the practical aspects of Highest Yoga Tantra beyond this point. She gave additional theoretical information about how the generation and completion stages interlink with the grounds and paths, and about how, when taking the death process into the meditation, its stages correspond to the Buddha bodies which the fully enlightened being assumes when entering into Buddhahood (31). Enough information was given so that one could intellectually grasp significant aspects of practical developments through the sequence of Tantra classes,



for instance, the progressive intimacy between practitioner and deity, but without really deriving an appreciation of the experiential states involved.

Amongst the committed Buddhists at Vajrayana Institute, the Tantric practitioners do not make themselves obvious. Information about engagement in Tantric activity tends to reveal itself in interview rather than in ordinary conversation. Interview data indicates that those who have received Tantric initiation hold to the Mahayana motivation; they practice with the ultimate aim of being of assistance to others. Generally, Tantra is not discussed as anything special or as something to hold in awe. Students and uninitiated sutric practitioners who show an interest in Tantra, want to know how it relates to Buddhism generally, and do not display morbid curiosity or set out trying to find easy access to Tantric material or practice. For instance, before their involvement with the FPMT, two committed practitioners of my acquaintance had very strong Tantric-style experiences that were at odds with the environment in which these experiences occurred: both in Theravada settings. On attending teachings at FPMT centres, both settled into patterns of study and practice that included sutric study, and concentration, analytical, and visualization practices. They both took on volunteer administration duties, and neither one consider themselves special or ‘advanced’.

The prerequisite for Tantric practice within the FPMT from the outset, is the bodhisattva motivation. The Dalai Lama notes that the bodhisattva vows, eighteen root vows and maintenance of the aspirational mind of enlightenment are prescribed for Action and Performance Tantra, and that Tantric Vows are prescribed for Yoga and Highest Yoga Tantra ([32](#)). At Vajrayana Institute as with all FPMT centres, it is expected that an individual has taken refuge before taking Tantric initiation. During the Introduction to Tantra module of the Discovering Buddhism course, the student is made aware that taking a Tantric initiation implies that one is taking vows and is therefore a Buddhist. During the refuge ceremony, one takes as many of the five lay vows as one feels able to keep. These are to abstain from killing, stealing, false speech, sexual misconduct, and

taking of intoxicants. Individuals are meant to keep which vows they have taken to themselves, although one teacher explained that everyone is expected to abstain from killing. My interview material reveals that while adherents occasionally break vows they have taken, they do not take them lightly, but with the best of intention. As one tantric practitioner related:

I guess I've come to the point now of realizing that you keep your vows as purely as you can to the best of your ability... I found several much easier than others. The not killing one I didn't think about. The not stealing and the not lying I took really seriously, and of course those in everyday life are very challenging. The sexual misconduct one I absolutely had no control over, although I aspired to it. The ones that really struck were the ones about speech, because the person I was closest to, my grandmother, had an absolutely wicked tongue, and I inherited it... And trying to work with that has been one of the challenges of my practice in this tradition, and I'm noticing since I've taken refuge, I've really begun to make progress with that. And just before I took refuge, I had an angry explosion at work of enormous dimensions. And I lived with great regret... (33)

The purpose of taking refuge before one takes Tantric initiation is to ensure that the practitioner has an ethical foundation on which to base their Tantric commitment and practice (34). During Introduction to Tantra in 2004 the teacher explained that Tantra, using the energy of desire and craving, is not in itself virtuous nor essentially pure, but becomes pure with the right motivation, the Mahayana or *bodhisattva* motivation discussed above. Using the energy of desire and craving without the motivation of attaining enlightenment is held to create attachment to the energy and hence negative karma.

The Sanskrit term *Abhiseka*, empowerment or conferral of power, carries the added meaning that through initiation the practitioner is empowered to do the *sadhana* or Tantric practice of a specific deity. It is understood within the tradition that an initiation may be taken as an empowerment which comes with commitments or as a blessing where the practitioner gains karmic benefits for attending

and listening to the commentary given by the Vajra master. The practitioner decides which of the two options they choose by either reciting or not reciting the vows at a certain point in the initiation. Occasionally those who attend the initiation as a blessing are unwittingly initiated by repeating the vows along with other initiands. This can result in practitioners being given commitments that they know they cannot keep. When one takes an initiation, practice instruction comes in the form of commitments, as just indicated. In interview, those respondents who indicated that they were Tantric initiates also explained that they took their commitments seriously, even though they often found them hard to keep. Occasionally, they would indicate the mental strategies they put in place in order to keep themselves motivated. One practitioner explained:

At least, the good thing about having commitments is I'm doing something. If I didn't have those commitments I'd do nothing; there'd be days I'd do nothing... But it's really good not to not do the commitments. I've spoken to people, everyone has said if you've made the commitment, it's very important to keep it; it's not something to lightly not do. (35)

One of the significant aspects of Tantric practice spoken about in *Introduction to Tantra* and in conversation, is that the initiand is not told what the commitment will be before the initiation is taken. To my knowledge the commitment is determined by the *Vajra* master, and anecdotal evidence suggests that it may be unexpectedly light, for instance, "try to say the deity's mantra as many times as you can through the week," or very heavy by comparison. A commitment may be as finite as, "do one thousand mantras," or seemingly infinite, "do (a certain number) everyday for the rest of your life." This can be seen as a psychological safety guard in two ways. First, it has the effect of warning off the idly curious. Second, the fact that practitioners are given commitments and are expected to keep them maintains an approach of seriousness toward Tantra, and helps the committed practitioner to maintain his or her motivation to practice. This is an important consideration when it is remembered that many of these aspirants balance their Buddhist commitments

with the demands of a busy lifestyle. According to the tradition, there are serious karmic consequences for transgressing one's vows (36), and practitioners are made aware of this along with the fact that if they fail to keep commitments, they can renew their vows by taking another initiation. In this way, they are given a viable approach to Tantric practice which helps them to maintain their motivation toward practice while not making it so seemingly difficult that practitioners lose heart.

From this it can be seen that Vajrayana Institute's teachings maintain and propagate an attitude of seriousness and respect toward Tantra. In the manner of its self-representation, it neither attempts to deliberately conceal nor reveal anything more than practitioners need to know in order to understand the relationship between the Sutric and Tantric paths. At the level of social organization there is a level of privacy which is maintained. Throughout my involvement with Vajrayana Institute, there have been but a handful of visible Tantric initiations. Those advertised in *Vajrayana News*, the centre's bimonthly newsletter are either Action Tantras or the Vajrayogini self-initiation, a Highest Yoga Tantra (37). Here, it seems that the point of secrecy is for the personal development of the practitioners: the privacy discourages the practitioner from developing an ego-centered approach to practice (38). Tantric practitioners do not discuss their Tantric involvement openly. In interview when I ask them about their daily practice and meditative experience, they tell me as much as they feel I need to know, and outline their Tantra commitments where appropriate alongside their Sutra practice in a matter-of-fact way. In the words of one such practitioner, "you're not meant to blah on about what initiations you've taken, I mean it is meant to be a private thing." (39)

Several other characteristics of Tantric activity suggest that in the Western context, the tradition emphasizes the practitioner's motivation and resolve to keep commitments above their ability to meditate. Ray contrasts the earlier days in India where Tantric practitioners would receive one initiation and carry out the practice for many years until they received a realization, with the current

situation in Tibet and the West where people might receive several initiations through large public ceremonial blessings (40). He refers to Trungpa Rinpoche who believes that this 'initiation collection' is done out of a need for a source of identity and security (41). Several respondents had taken Tantric initiation, and some were 'serial initiates.' Example patterns are: 'Kalachakra and two Vajrasattva initiations', 'Medicine Buddha, White Tara and Green Tara, Kalachakra initiation, Cittamani Tara which is a higher yoga Tantra of Green Tara, and '1000-arm Chenrezig and Green Tara'.

Much research was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s on the nature of religious change, with many sociologists of religion concluding that religious conversion could be described in terms of identity change. However, while some of these researchers saw the purpose of religious ritual and conversion rhetoric as indicative of change that had already occurred, Staples and Mauss saw the use of both ritual and rhetoric as the attempt to achieve a transformation of self (42). That practitioners see these rituals, both initiations and *sadhana*s, as the means to effect personal change is supported by comments made by students in class discussion and informal conversation over the period of fieldwork. In interview no-one referred to the transformative action of Tantric ritual as anything distinct from sutric practice. Mental transformation is held to come about through the same means: through the creation of merit by positive ritual action which will purify the mindstream allowing for deeper realizations. In addition, during the discussion of The Heart Sutra in the Emptiness Module in 2004, while referring to the practice of deity visualization the teacher stated that visualizing oneself as a deity is done in order to effect a shift in the sense of self held by the practitioner (43). This is the way in which the transformative power of Tantric practice is commonly understood by my interview respondents.

Personal transformation is the goal of Tantric practice, but from the view of the tradition, one's motivation must be established and effectively maintained before the deeper personal transformations effected by Tantric practice can occur. Initiation gives the practitioner practices to do regularly in the form of commitments:

visualizations and *mantra* recitations. The taking of an initiation and commitments wipes out previous commitments, and so in this way, one gets to start again. More immediate in its effect than a form of ritual identity construction, it is a way, although not ideal, of renewing one's motivation to practice, which may be necessary on occasions where the pressures of living have eroded the quality of one's practice. This and the preservation of secrecy behind the visibility of Action Tantra are promoted by the FPMT system itself. In this way, the motivation of the practitioner is continually highlighted and reinforced.

The purpose of Tantric practice is to develop or manifest the qualities of the deity whose practice the individual engages with. Stated in Introduction to Tantra, was that 'the basis of Tantra is to access the pure Buddha mind,' and that 'the idea behind visualizing the deities is that you are getting in touch with what's already there.' (44) Similarly, the convenor of the *Medicine Buddha* practice day held in May 2005, explained that the Medicine Buddha is the archetypal healing energy in all of us. One practitioner told me:

All these deities are just emanations, different emanations of the Buddha. It might seem like to people that there are all these weird goddesses and gods or something that you're paying homage to, but it's all just different emanations of the Buddha and that's really different aspects of your own Buddha nature. One might be enlightened action, one might be ultimate compassion. They're just different aspects of the qualities that you want to develop. (45)

In line with the idea that the real meaning of a Tantra is understood through its practice, the meanings of the deities arise through the regular practice and service of them. Scholars have remarked that the secrecy of Tantra lies in the fact that it is meant to be practiced and experienced rather than its meaning being evident in a text (46). According to Wayman, the texts do not contain enough practical detail for performance, and the guru supplies the missing detail (47). He also states that due to this, the deities do not have meanings in the western sense of intellectual understanding, although westerners want to know the meaning of the deities and their *mantras* (48). When I first began attending teachings at

Vajrayana Institute, I was initially surprised by the seeming lack of systematization or categorization of deities and their attributions. In teachings, the Buddha families are sometimes referred to, but their symbolism is not explored in any analytical manner. Although tables exist outlining correspondences between the five Dhyani Buddhas and the five aggregates for example, these are not formally taught as part of doctrine (49). Practitioners know that Chenrezig is compassion, Tara is compassionate action, and Vajrasattva is mental purification (50). Instruction given during the Medicine Buddha practice day in 2005, exemplifies this point. The convenor noted that throughout the literature, the names and colors of the Medicine Buddhas are not always consistent, and occasionally gave direction such as to “try to feel the presence of the Medicine Buddhas” (51).

Ideally, practitioners are meant to have some success with meditation before they enter Tantric practice (52). However, the Dalai Lama notes that Action and Performance Tantra are practical for many people, because as opposed to meditating on emptiness or on a deity, “the meditator is mainly concerned with achieving clarity of appearance of a divine body, mantra letters and so forth, and thus cannot *mainly* meditate on emptiness.” (53) The majority of practitioners that I interviewed had not attained this meditative stability, and instead strove for it and used the deity visualizations as a concentration exercise. As one reported, “the higher Tantra practitioners, people who have been doing it for a long time, they can do incredible things with energy channels in their body. Believe me, I can’t control anything. I’m at the stage of trying to get my visualizations to be clearer.” (54)

Apart from success with meditation, successful Tantric practice involves the right mental orientation on the part of the practitioner. It seems that the Tantric path involves the ability to see all aspects of the human being as essentially pure, and as having the ultimate nature of emptiness. According to the Dalai Lama, in all four Tantras the body is divine; the ability to see the body this way is a prerequisite to deity yoga. He maintains that even in Action Tantra, one is meant to cultivate self-generation, but because some practitioners cannot, most action Tantras do not clearly present

Deity Yoga. In its practice one must be able to maintain the view of being a deity and having a divine body, and ‘remain free from conceptions of ordinariness and of inherent existence.’ (55) One must value oneself as pure without becoming attached to the sense-of-self as permanent. For the Western lay practitioner, seeing oneself as both divine and of the ultimate nature of emptiness, presents two separate challenges. With respect to the second, from the data obtained from participant observation and interview, as stated above, I am convinced that the practitioners of my acquaintance struggle conceptually with the meaning of emptiness, and expect to understand it further along the path, when karmic conditions are right.

With respect to the former challenge, a significant consideration for the western practitioner is the way in which they must adapt to the Tibetan understanding of the relationship between mind and body. Guenther refers to the West as having an extreme dualism of body and mind, where the mind is seen as having a higher value than the body, which may become an object of aversion. He contrasts this with the Tantric view of body and mind as interdependent and interpenetrating, where the whole person is given equal value (56). Similarly, Samuel refers to the Tibetan understanding of the mind as embodied (57). This means for the practitioner, the mind-body complex and its impulses such as desire must be seen as essentially pure for Tantric practice. More than this, the practitioner must be able to use desire without becoming attached to it or its objects. Often discussion in Discovering Buddhism and other classes at Vajrayana Institute suggests that practitioners express ambiguity toward mental and emotional states that they have been taught to see as unwholesome, for example, anger and desire. During interview, one Sutric practitioner described his own process of reconciliation between renunciation and desire:

Respondent: What I understand now as true complete renunciation, is a very profound position, a profound understanding that everything in our existence is a form of suffering, and Geshe said that when you have true renunciation, your desire for liberation, it won't be intellectual, it will be an urge.



Interviewer: It will just be an urge that will consume you?

Respondent: Yes, it's not something that you'll have to think about, it'll just be there. He said that it doesn't mean that you give everything up, because if you say that everything's suffering, you can understand where people go off on that tangent, this extreme of giving everything up, you can understand where they get that from. If they know that you're still able to do things without attachment, it's a tricky one to get. The example I use with myself, I used to be quite overweight and I used to eat a lot, and now when I look back at my relationship with food, it was greedy, attachment, it was not really satisfying. I'd eat but it wouldn't really satisfy me. I was eating for the wrong reasons, and it was a real grasping relationship with food, whereas now I love to cook, and I love food, and I prepare food for people, I get a real enjoyment out of it, but there isn't this greedy grasping thing? So I'd sort of used that as an example with myself, like a renouncing of food as a source of pleasure and satisfaction, by grasping at it but now that I've given it up, I now enjoy it more than I used to.

Interviewer: It seems to be something about the nature of that extreme grasping, that pushes the pleasure away, it's an odd one.

Respondent: Exactly, it pushes the pleasure away. You see that clearly, it's when we grasp at things, there's that addictive quality of wanting it, it pushes the pleasure out. And then there's that other fear in your head, but if I give up the grasping will I lose it? How can I give up the grasping? There's one thing that I always want to ask about, but I'm too embarrassed to ask about is sex, you know, because it's got to be one of the biggest grasping things... The idea in Tantra of using desire, I've never really understood in Tantra how that works. The one thing that has become clear to me, is that if you can enjoy things without grasping at them, and you are really freeing up your attitude towards them, then there's enjoyment. But where's the desire? If you free up your grasping, isn't your desire dropping away? That's how I feel about it. When I think about it with all sorts of desires, I try to recognize it for what it is, and I suppose if you can use the desire and recognize what it is, and mentally say 'I want to bring this desire into the path and dedicate it

toward the path,' that's given me something to think about. (58)

These comments reflect the respondent's approach to the problem of desire and its renunciation, after considerable reflection on his prior approaches and behaviors related to desire and craving. His new understanding is a result of incorporating the Buddhist position into his own thought after the recognition that the impulses were capable of modification. Bodily and mental impulses, the sources of attachment and aversion, need to be seen simultaneously as pure and as things to be renounced. The ideal state of preparation for Tantric practice, being accomplished in concentration and insight, and having a view of one's body and mind as pure and divine, is an aspirational attainment rather than a reality. It must be considered that the bodhisattva path as a prerequisite to Tantric practice orients the mind toward attaining the appropriate view of self within a framework of compassionate and ideally selfless motivation, so as to ensure the practitioner's self-discipline with respect to the influence of the internal field of bodily, emotional, and mental energy, on the reification and inflation of the ego. It seems that sutra practice is necessary to train the mind conceptually and experientially to avoid the extremes of attachment and aversion to one's bodily, emotional, and mental energy. This is necessary before the basic energy of desire and attachment can be transmuted into the desire for enlightenment, and harnessed for Tantric practice.

## **Conclusion**

Through the exploration of the visible characteristics of Tantric activity as they are manifest within the FPMT's doctrinal outlook and practice, it is evident that the FPMT maintains a strong adherence to the doctrinal foundations of the Gelugpa lineage and its Mahayana orientation. Urban's point about the identification of forms of Tantra through their family resemblances is supported; one cannot help but see that Tantric practice is utilized for the goals of Mahayana Buddhism where practitioners strive to transform their habitual thinking into *bodhicitta*. Teaching and ritual activities at Vajrayana Institute in Sydney constantly reinforce the *bodhisattva* motivation of practitioners: that personal growth is to be dedicated to the benefit of others. Overall, one is left with the impression that

correct motivation is more important than demonstrable achievements such as the collection of conceptual knowledge and the ability to meditate.

## Endnotes

(1) Urban, H. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, University of California Press, 2003. [Return to Text](#)

(2) Wayman, A. *The Buddhist Tantras: Light on Indo-Tibetan Esotericism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, p82; Guenther, H. *The Tantric View of Life*, Shambala Publications, 1972, pix. [Return to Text](#)

(3) Guenther, 1972, *op.cit.*, p2. Guenther believes that the word Tantrism has become almost synonymous with Hindu Tantra, and more is known about it than Buddhist Tantra [Return to Text](#)

(4) Samuel, G. *Tantric Revisionings: New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*, Ashgate, 2005, pp328-329. See pp329-340 for Samuel's outline of four lines of approach to understanding Tibetan Buddhism in the western context: the need for authoritative knowledge, moral authority, and community, and technologies of the self. [Return to Text](#)

(5) See the FPMT website, [www.fpmt.org](http://www.fpmt.org), for information about the organization and its affiliated centres. When accessed on 07/04/2007, the website reported to have meditation centres in 31 countries, monasteries and nunneries in 6 countries, leprosy clinics, polio clinics, hospices, and publishing houses. [Return to Text](#)

(6) See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, and Ray, R. *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*, Shambala, 2001. See Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p142, who notes that according to the Gelugpa order Tantric practices should only be carried out on a sound basis of monastic practice and Mahayana ethics. [Return to Text](#)

(7) Guenther, 1972, *op.cit.*, pix [Return to Text](#)

(8) Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, pp3-4. Wayman believes that in order to correctly understand Buddhist Tantra, it is necessary to first study the Mahayana, especially in its formal presentation in the Madhyamika and Yogacara schools [Return to Text](#)

(9) Ruegg, D. “Introduction”, in Tsongkhapa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Snow Lion Publications, volume 1, 2000, pp21-22. Ruegg refers to Tsongkapa’s allusion to the question of how the Vajrayana path relates to the sutra or prajnaparamita path. Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p4. Wayman refers to Tsongkhapa’s division of the Mahayana into two; the prajnaparamita method, the part that is not tantric, and the mantra method, the part this is strictly Tantric; together, cause and effect. [Return to Text](#)

(10) This Medicine Buddha initiation was conducted at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown, Sydney, on April 30 2005. [Return to Text](#)

(11) See Powers, J. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, Snow Lion Publications, 1995, especially Chapter 15, for the treatment of Lam Rim in the writings of Lama Tsong Khapa. [Return to Text](#)

(12) Cutler, J. “Preface”. in Tsongkhapa, 2000, *op.cit.*, pp9-11. [Return to Text](#)

(13) Valham, K (compiler). *Lam.Rim Outlines: Beginners’ Meditation Guide*, Wisdom Publications, 1997. The preface in this publication serves the purpose of outlining the three scopes. [Return to Text](#)

(14) Tsongkhapa, 2000, *op.cit.* [Return to Text](#)

(15) Tsongkhapa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Snow Lion Publications, volume two, 2004. [Return to Text](#)

(16) Tsongkhapa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Snow Lion Publications, volume three, 2002. See also Valham, *op.cit.*, who states that practitioners of the third scope make their practice of calm-abiding and analytical meditation on emptiness a cause for enlightenment. [Return to Text](#)

(17) Kelsang Gyatso. *The Meditation Handbook*, New Age Books, New Delhi, 2002. This is noted by Kelsang Gyatso, who was influential in the FPMT's foundation and early propagation. [Return to Text](#)

(18) Tsongkhapa. *Preparing for Tantra: The Mountain of Blessings*, the Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1995. Also see Kelsang Gyatso. *The Meditation Handbook*, New Age Books, 2002, pp6-7. Tulku Thondup, in Ray, R. *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*, Shambala, 2001, ppviii-ix. Also see Tulku Thondup for a discussion of the way in which Tantric initiates practice all three Buddhist paths: the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. They live according to the moral codes of Hinayana practice, they maintain bodhisattva aspirations, and they take the Tantric view of everything as the path of pure nature. [Return to Text](#)

(19) Teachings given in FPMT centres can be categorized into two types: the western-style given by western teachers, and the more traditional style given by Tibetan sangha members in Tibetan and translated into English by a translator. Several key differences exist between the two styles, for instance, the western-style facilitates more spontaneous teacher-student interaction during the teaching, and includes meditation practice and experiential exercises to illustrate points of doctrine. The traditional-style generally consists of an exposition on a topic or a commentary on a root text. Western teachers may be sangha members or lay Buddhists, several of whom at Vajrayana Institute have been trained psychologists. Apart from the resident geshe, Vajrayana Institute also conducts teachings by visiting Tibetan sangha members. Information on the centre's current teachers is available from the website at [www.vajrayana.com.au/teachers.html](http://www.vajrayana.com.au/teachers.html). Information on courses of study offered at FPMT centres can be found at [www.fpmt.org](http://www.fpmt.org). [Return to Text](#)

(20) The module I attended was held in January-February 2004, at Vajrayana Institute, Newtown, Sydney. [Return to Text](#)

(21) Interview conducted on 15 January 2004. Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, the current head of the FPMT is referred to as Lama

Zopa. [Return to Text](#)

(22) Interview conducted on 24 March 2004. [Return to Text](#)

(23) The Wisdom of Emptiness is the last module in the Discovering Buddhism course. This module was taught from 11 May-15 June 2004 at Vajrayana Institute. [Return to Text](#)

(24) Module 15: The Wisdom of Emptiness: 11 May-15 June 2004. The Heart Sutra as it is usually referred to, is recited before every teaching at Vajrayana Institute. [Return to Text](#)

(25) This took place on 15 June 2004, the last night of the course. [Return to Text](#)

(26) Introduction to Tantra, January-February 2004. This module was taught by a western lay teacher who is also a practicing psychotherapist, and by her own disclosure, a Tantric initiate. [Return to Text](#)

(27) Tenzin Gyatso, in Tenzin Gyatso, Tsong-ka-pa, and Hopkins, J. *Deity Yoga In Action and Performance Tantra*, Jeffrey Hopkins editor and translator, Snow Lion Publications, 1987, p17. [Return to Text](#)

(28) Hopkins, *ibid.*, p. 210. Hopkins refers to techniques revolving around and using the bliss arising from the desire for male-female union which can be seen as an extension of the “smiling” and “looking with desire” metaphor, used to describe action and performance Tantra respectively. [Return to Text](#)

(29) The four classes of Tantra were outlined briefly during *Introduction to Tantra*, January-February 2004. The generation stage involves practices such as mimicking the death process, the stages of which correspond to the Buddha bodies. Also see Wayman’s table, 1974, *op.cit.*, p33. [Return to Text](#)

(30) Hopkins, 1987, *op.cit.*, p210. Hopkins adds that Highest Yoga Tantra is used to cognize emptiness, and its techniques revolve around using the bliss arising from the desire for male-female union. [Return to Text](#)

- (31) See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.* His table on p.33 contains this kind of information. [Return to Text](#)
- (32) Tenzin Gyatso, 1987, *op.cit.*, pp15-16. [Return to Text](#)
- (33) Interview conducted on 15 March 2004. [Return to Text](#)
- (34) Tenzin Gyatso, 1987, *op.cit.*, pp15-16. Here the Dalai Lama outlines the vows for each of the four classes of Tantra. Those engaged in Action and Performance Tantra take the Bodhisattva vows: eighteen root vows and maintenance of the aspirational mind of enlightenment, while those engaged in Yoga and Highest Yoga take Tantric Vows. [Return to Text](#)
- (35) Interview conducted on 3 March 2004. This practitioner was willing to discuss which Tantric initiations she had taken, her appreciation of the ethical aspects of tantric practice, and some of the experiential effects of her own practice. [Return to Text](#)
- (36) See Tsongkhapa. Tantric Ethics: An Explanation of the Precepts for Buddhist Vajrayana Practice, Gareth Sparham translator, Wisdom Publications, 2005, pp115-131. Chapter five, How to Keep a Tantric Ordination, is a commentary on the consideration of thinking about the benefits of protecting, and the penalties of not protecting the vows. [Return to Text](#)
- (37) Notice of initiation are given in the Centre's newsletter, Vajrayana News. This can be viewed at [www.vajrayana.com.au/newsletter.html](http://www.vajrayana.com.au/newsletter.html). I have been aware of a small number of Action Tantra initiations taking place locally over the few years of my involvement, with three of them taking place in 2005. [Return to Text](#)
- (38) Ray, 2001, *op.cit.*, p114, advances this explanation. [Return to Text](#)
- (39) Interview conducted on 3 March 2004. [Return to Text](#)
- (40) Ray, 2001, *op.cit.*, p114. Also see Layman, E. *Buddhism in America*, Nelson-Hall, 1976, p84, for a description of the private teacher-student relationship in America. [Return to Text](#)

(41) *ibid.*, pp197-198. [Return to Text](#)

(42) See Snow, D, and Machalek, R. “The Sociology of Conversion”, in *Annual Review of Sociology* 10. pp. 167-90, Ralph H. Turner editor, Annual Reviews Inc., California, 1984, for an outline of the former view. See Staples, C, and Mauss, A. “Conversion or Commitment? A Reassessment of the Snow and Machalek Approach to the Study of Conversion”, in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 [2], pp. 133-147, Donald Capps editor, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1987, for the latter. [Return to Text](#)

(43). See the description of practitioners’ orientation toward emptiness-of-self above, and footnote 25 above. [Return to Text](#)

(44) Introduction to Tantra, January-February 2004. [Return to Text](#)

(45) Interview conducted on 3 March 2004. [Return to Text](#)

(46) See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p60. [Return to Text](#)

(47) Wayman, 1974, p41; p55; p62. In this vein, Wayman also says that the sexual symbolism itself is not the secret. [Return to Text](#)

(48) Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p54. [Return to Text](#)

(49) Wayman refers to a correspondence between the five skandhas, personality aggregates, and five corporeal centres. See Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, p20. [Return to Text](#)

(50) Lama Thubten Yeshe. *Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification*, Wisdom Publications, 2004, p287. Vajrasattva is the male meditational deity symbolizing the inherent purity of all buddhas. His practice removes obstacles created by negative karma and breaking vows. [Return to Text](#)

(51) The Medicine Buddha practice day was held on 28 May 2005, at Vajrayana Institute, Newtown, Sydney. [Return to Text](#)

(52) Ray, 2001, *op.cit.*, p177, states that the initiate is supposed to have achieved some success with concentration. Wayman, 1974, *op.cit.*, pp110-11, refers to the fact that concentration and insight, calming the mind and discerning the truth, are considered to be the



backbone of Sutric and Tantric practices. [Return to Text](#)

(53) Tenzin Gyatso, 1987, *op.cit.*, p15. [Return to Text](#)

(54) Interview conducted on 3 March 2004. [Return to Text](#)

(55) Tenzin Gyatso, 1987, *op.cit.*, pp9-12. [Return to Text](#)

(56) Guenther, 1972, *op.cit.*, pp6-9 [Return to Text](#)

(57) Samuel, 2005, *op.cit.*, p339. [Return to Text](#)

(58) Interview conducted on 7 December 2004. [Return to Text](#)

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