

Imagination 3

Om Vairocana Hum

Introduction

These are the notes from the third week of four-week journey with the Bristol Sangha, exploring imagination through the Buddhist tradition and practically, in our own spiritual lives. This week we explore “Tantric Buddhism and the Mandala: transforming energy” and we'll conclude with a week on “Bhante Sangharakshita and our own tradition: the role of imagination in the future”.

This week we come to the third 'great phase' of Buddhism – Tantric Buddhism or the Vajra-yana, the 'Vajra-way', we'll look at:

- What is 'Tantric Buddhism', why is it called the Vajrayana – what's a vajra, really?!
- How the Vajrayana views the Dharma-life in terms of *energy* – and what the implications of that are
- How an understanding of the symbol of the *mandala* can help us, both individually and collectively as a Sangha, in our practice

Tantric Buddhism and the Vajra-yana, the 'vajra-way'

What is 'Tantric Buddhism'?

In 1972 Bhante gave a great series of talks called 'Creative Symbols of the Tantric Path'. He began by asking 'What is the Tantra?' and went on to say that he wasn't going to 'attempt any formal definition' but that he hoped 'to communicate something, as it were, of the inner feeling of the Tantra'. He did, however, say

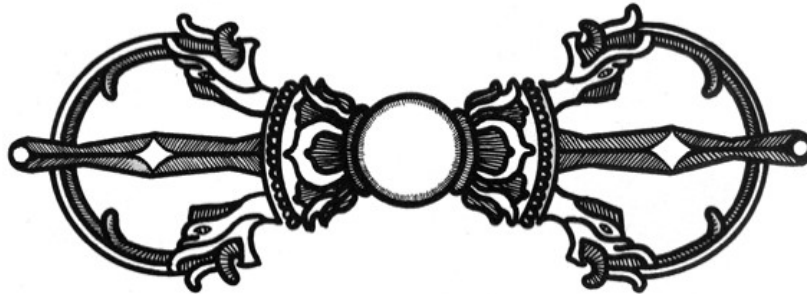
the Tantra represents that aspect of Buddhism that is concerned not with theories, much less still with speculations, not with formal religiosity, not with external piety, but concerned with the direct experience, in the depths of one's own being, as it were, of what one truly and essentially is. Not 'is' just psychologically, but IS, one might say, existentially, metaphysically, transcendently. And this experience, insofar as the Tantric Path is concerned, cannot be mediated by concepts. Concepts can give no idea of it whatsoever, cannot indicate it in any way, cannot lead one to it in any way. But this experience, this direct experience above and beyond words, above and beyond thought, above and beyond the conscious mind, even the conscious personality, can be evoked, can almost be conjured up, releasing some partial glimpse, some distant reflection with the help of symbols, symbols of various kinds.¹

¹ Excerpt from a transcript of Sangharakshita's lecture 'The Symbolism of the Tibetan Wheel of Life' available in original audio (recommended!) or as a transcript on freebuddhistaudio.com. It is the first in a series of 8 lectures on 'Creative Symbols of the Tantric Path' later also published as a book incorporating additional material from subsequent seminars on the theme – 'Creative Symbols of Tantric Buddhism' available from Windhorse Publications.

The Vajra and the 'Vajrayana' or 'Vajra-way'

So, with our 'imaginal faculties' hopefully alert and ready to go, we'll plunge in with the most fundamental symbol of Tantric Buddhism, the vajra. The vajra gives its name to this 'third great phase' of the development of Buddhism, the Vajrayana. By looking at the symbolism of the vajra we might be able to evoke and conjure up a feel for the Vajrayana, for Tantric Buddhism.

This is a vajra:



Well. It's a *representation* of a vajra! Sometimes described as a 'diamond thunderbolt', we need to use our imagination to get a sense of this. We need to *imagine* that it is a combination of two seemingly contradictory things: an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. Just see if you can sit with a sense of those two things – *both at once!* *An unstoppable force. An immovable object.* Something has to give, for us to understand this. In fact we *can't* understand it with our mundane consciousness. It's a symbol that contains a tremendous amount of power and it embodies the mystery of spiritual transformation.

I'm not going to talk about the historical origins of the vajra², but rather about *how*, as a symbol, it can help us on our Dharma journey – or 'unfoldment'. Indeed we *can* see the vajra as embodying the whole of the path of vision and transformation. It has two ends and it has a round bit in the middle. The middle is important. It's a sphere that represents *sunyata*, the *open dimension of being*. The sphere represents, we could say, *reality itself*. And to the extent that we have some glimpse of or connection with reality, with that 'open dimension of being', we have one crucial bit of what it takes to start out on the path. All of us, *to some extent* have probably had some glimpse of this, or we wouldn't be here. Like we said in the first week, we've all had a glimpse of something, some way of being that is '*more than*' the endlessly repetitive cycle of the mundane world. We've had a glimpse and to some extent we're already on the path (whether we like it or not, whether we choose to carry on *treading* that path or not). The 'glimpse of reality' comes first, and what's next is actually setting out to move towards that glimpse, that vision. To '*realize*' it in our own lives. To make it real in our own lives. That is the path of transformation symbolised by the vajra.

So how does the vajra represent the journey? It's not a journey in a literal sense, of course. It's a journey through which we transform our unskillfulness, our craving, hatred

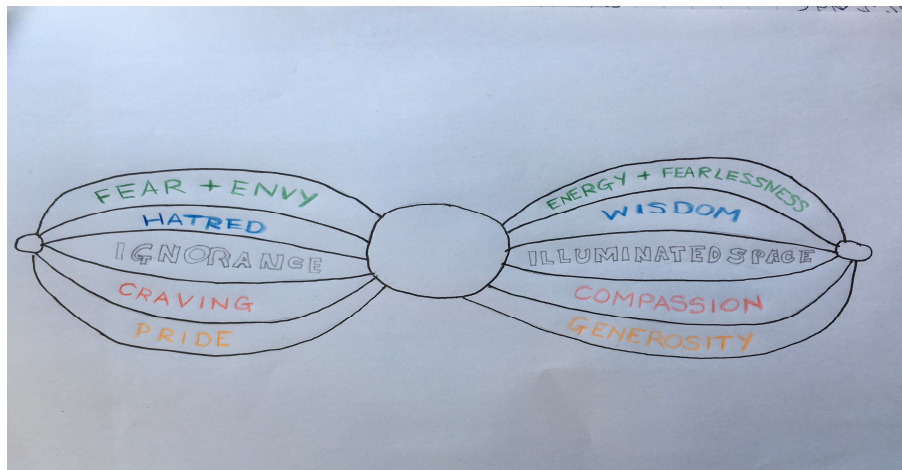
2 Except to say that it's a key symbol of Tantric/Vajrayana Buddhism which flourished particularly in Tibet from around the 8th century of the Common Era, but also took other forms, eg in Japan.

and delusion, into skilfulness, into wisdom, into enlightenment. We are the raw materials of our own awakening. There's nothing 'out there' that's going to 'get us unenlightened'. We can be *inspired* by what we see in the world around us, but it's in the *crucible of our own hearts* that the really work of transformation happens. It's like a journey *within*, like our own hobbit quest to find our own deepest energies and *transform* them so that they can shine out like treasure hidden inside the mountain of our mundane selves.

The vajra has two 'ends', each (traditionally) with five prongs: one end represents five aspects of our deluded mind, the other symbolising those delusions transformed into five positive qualities, or wisdoms. The vajra shows us that our unskilfulnesses (what the Buddhist tradition calls 'the poisons') can be transformed by our practice into the qualities of awakening. The real journey symbolised by the Vajra is to take all our energies towards the purifying white light of *sunyata*, of reality, and to allow them to emerge, transformed, as qualities of the enlightened mind. To make that journey through the centre of the vajra is to come face-to-face with the darkest imaginings of our *reactive minds*, our *reactive imagination* - all those stories we tell ourselves and for so long believed to be true.

An example of my own: for twenty years my 'reactive imagination' had me believe that I dragged around behind me a big 'bag' of shame for stuff that happened way back in my childhood when I'd been on the receiving end of inappropriate sexual attention. I didn't tell anyone, and my belief in that bagfull of shame weighed me down and drove me to over-work again and again in a futile endeavour to compensate for 'feeling bad'. It was a process of many years to turn towards that imagined bag, to go into it and see what 'hostages' were tied up in there. My carefreeness was tied up in there, my freedom-from-anxiety. And in that bag I also found the 'poison' of pride – a kind of turned-inside-out-pride that had me believe I had specially bad shame that was worse than everyone else's! A mistaken view that I was solely and personally responsible for everything that happened in my world. That I should have been able to prevent 'bad things' happening to myself – and to other people. Now that's an understandably mistaken view for a child because the alternative was way too scary. But the problem was I carried on recreating that story and living by it, re-imagining that heavy, heavy bag in my reactive imagination and keeping myself weighed down by it. I'm not completely free of the habit of shame, even now, but I am quicker at spotting the signs, of 'smelling' when it's around. My friends are good at spotting it too! And I have come to agree with the poet William Blake that 'shame is pride's cloak'. There's an energy that gets 'locked up' in ignorance and pride which can be liberated into openness and generosity. This illustration shows how the poisons transform into correspondencing qualities of the enlightened mind³:

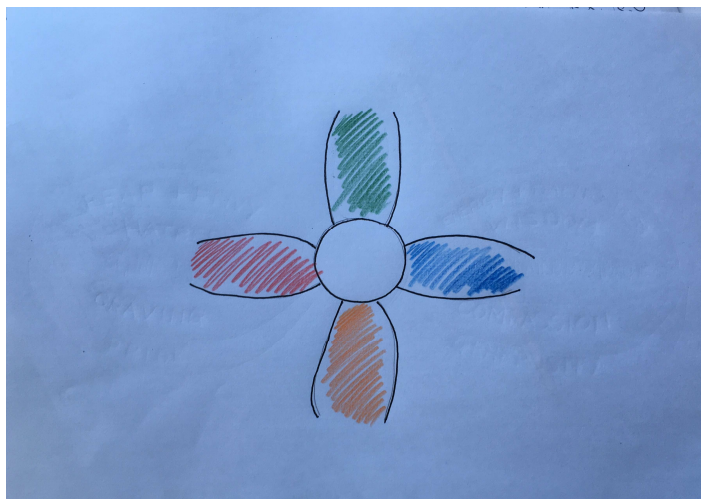
³ For the purposes of this talk and this illustration I've simplified the correspondences drawing also on the five spiritual faculties as qualities of the Enlightened Mind. For more on the transformation of 'poisons' into wisdoms see eg Sangharakshita's lecture on *The Depth Psychology of the Yogacara*, transcription available on freebuddhistaudio.com, p10-11. Also Vessantara, *A Guide to the Buddhas*, which has a handy table on pages 138-9. For more on the Five Spiritual Faculties, see eg *A Survey of Buddhism* or *What is the Dharma?* (Chapter 9). These three books are all available from Windhorse Publications.



Vajra as symbol of 'path' AND of 'lotus' or 'flower'

Now. We've been looking at the Vajra from one point of view, from one perspective. This is often how we look at life – from our usual point of view or habitual way of seeing things. The way we see ourselves is like this: we have a habitual idea of 'who we are', or even '*that* we are' (ie that we *exist* in a particular way). Somebody else would see our life – and their own life, quite differently. But we're so accustomed to our own 'self-view' that it generally takes a jolt or a nudge to enable us to see that *there's more than one way to look at things*. That our 'me-centred' view of the world isn't the way other people see it. (And it isn't the way things are!) What's more, the more we cling to wanting the world to be the way we imagine it, the more suffering we are storing up for ourselves. For this reason it's good to learn to see things from different perspectives. And that's what we're going to do now.

The Vajra is a good symbol for this, as (like everything) there are two ways of looking at it. And depending on *how* you look at it, you see something different. Looked at in the way we have, the vajra shows a path of transformation from left to right. *However* if we turn the vajra through 90 degrees and look at it 'end on', what do we get?



We get something that looks a lot more like a *flower*. Thus this symbol of the path of transformation has, almost 'hidden' within it, the image of the flower. (Or mandala – but we'll come to that later.)

Seeing the Dharma-life in terms of energy

What these two illustrations of the vajra can show us is that we *could* choose to see ourselves – and everyone – just as patterns of energy that manifest in a particular way. What would it be like if we just could tune-in more to the patterns of energy manifesting in ourselves and others, without getting into the self-referential stories about them? That's a 'vajra' way of seeing. Seeing the 'emptiness', the 'energy' at play. Not pinning it down into a fixed story. You see the spiritual life as a path, your friend sees it as a flower unfolding – in fact *both* are just stories, images, different ways of looking at the 'vajra', which is not ultimately graspable.

We look through different 'lenses': Some of us are more prone to fear and anxiety, others to hatred. Some of us experience craving as the overwhelming driver in our lives, for others it's pride. We all have *all* of these 'poisons', to some degree. And behind, or central to them *all* is ignorance. We simply don't see things the way they are. We're stuck in our own habitual view – just like us looking at the vajra just now. We could go on looking at it side-ways on for our whole lives, and not realise that, if we took another perspective, then it's also showing us the image of a (kind of) flower. (OK, you need imagination to see this, but you do *have* imagination!) One person may see the spiritual life as a linear journey from one end of the Vajra to the other, another person maybe looking at the same Vajra 'end on' and see their spiritual life as a 'deepening into' qualities that lie behind or beneath the 'surface' level where these untransformed energies manifest as poisons, but ultimately (and with practice) give way to positive qualities, to 'wisdoms'.

The vajra also shows us (from the side-on view) that these energies in us, no matter how strong or gross, *can be transformed*. Whatever our 'poisons are' they can be the fuel – even the *rocket fuel* of our awakening.

There's a great bit in a wonderful poem by the Irish poet Louis MacNiece. It's probably the last poem he wrote, and it's called *Thalassa*, which is Greek for sea. I've always loved the sense of my spiritual life being like setting out on the sea of the Dharma. What MacNiece says is:

*You know the worst, your wills are fickle,
Your values blurred, your hearts impure
And your past lives a ruined church.
But let your poison be your cure.*

So the Vajrayana sees the Dharma life in terms of energy, energy that can be transformed. And, if we each and all engage as wholeheartedly as we can in Dharma practice, a *lot* of energy will get stirred up. This idea of the 'calm and quiet Buddhist' can be a superficial reading of the popular image of the Buddha, which doesn't convey the unimaginable amount of powerful energy which is transformed – and contained – *within* that 'vajric' stillness. (The 'unstoppable force meeting an immovable object').

But meanwhile, back with *us*. The 'Kings and Queens' of our energies that we saw in the first week aren't weedy little beings who sit about meekly. They are *big* characters, with *big* energy. And, when it's roused, that energy sometimes flies about, to the extent that we're in connection and communication with each other. And, before we learn to handle it skilfully (a bit like a power hose!) it *can* mean we bang up against one another in a way

that doesn't feel 'Very Buddhist' at all! It can mean that we come into *conflict*. To the extent that we are ignorant, that we don't have the wisdom – and imagination – to see the big picture that is Reality, we are likely to experience someone else's 'different-to-us-big-energy' as threatening. And we'll react in our preferred way – perhaps fearfully, or with anger and aversion. Or maybe we crave a quiet life, and so we try to smooth things over and keep it all calm and nice. Or, if we're a 'proud type' we might just sit there feeling condescending, knowing that we have 'the right way of seeing things'. Or we might just choose to ignore the whole thing. (The etymological connection between 'ignore' and 'ignorance' is well worth pondering.)

None of these approaches is (ultimately) going to work. All of these approaches will lead to the creation of more negative karma which, in due course, will inevitably ripen and cause us more dukkha.

The symbol of the mandala – and how it can help us individually and collectively

What is a mandala?

A mandala is sometimes described as a 'magic circle' and, as Jung found, it seems to be a pretty universal symbol of how some deep patterning in our minds works. Bhante describes a mandala :

“To make a mandala is to take any prominent aspect of reality and surround it with beauty.” Why you should select one particular aspect of reality over another will be a matter not of attraction as a form of craving, but of spiritual affinity.⁴

So, following on from last week and the image of the 'seeds of potential' in us. We could say that we create a mandala by recognising the 'seed' of our deepest true longing or heart-wish (our 'work') and then placing that at the centre of how we imagine – and organise – our life. Then we can welcome *all* those energies that dwell within us and gradually transform them into a *harmonious* relationship with what is most of value to us. With our deepest 'spiritual affinity'. The reason the relation can be harmonious is because they are all related to – and through – this central *unifying* principle. There is, one could say, a central truth or perspective, to which all the other 'angles' or 'perspectives' relate. For example, the energies of irritation and anger can be transformed into powerful energies of protection – that's what those blue Tibetan figures represent. The energies of craving can be transformed into a positive fascination with our spiritual longing, and so on.

We can see the pattern of the mandala in the end-on view of the vajra. It illustrates a way of understand enlightenment itself. We could imagine the Buddha, the embodiment of the enlightenment principle, as a pure white light. When that 'light' is refracted through the prism of the material world, it is refracted into many different rainbow colours. But they all originate from that central 'light' of the Buddha, the enlightened mind. Thus mind has many qualities, which are poisons transformed and purified.

I guess this is how the image of the mandala arose in the imagination of the tantric tradition. As a representation of all possible energies, *brought into harmonious relationship*. If we develop an understanding of the whole, then we can understand that

⁴ From *Wisdom Beyond Words*

we each manifest different aspects of the enlightened mind, to different degrees at different times. (And in a more or less transformed state!!)

How can we relate to it?

One of the things which the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions recognised was that we find it easier to engage our emotional energies in relation to *beings*, even imagined beings, than we do to relate to abstract ideas, concepts and 'things'. Thus there evolved a tradition of the *imaginative embodiment* of Dharma truths in 'archetypal beings'. Not beings you are going to meet in the street (probably), but beings who can speak to 'the kings and queens' of our own imaginations. (Blake said "All deities reside in the human breast", ie that it is *our imagination* that creates God, not vice versa.)

There's a lovely story about the Perfection of Wisdom tradition that we mentioned last week. (That's the one which is said to have started when Nagarguna was given the teachings by a Naga princess who emerged from the bottom of a lake.) Well, originally they were symbolised by a book, not unreasonably. But over time, the creative imagination of practitioners came to see those teachings not just as a book, but as a goddess, as Prajnaparamita. Somebody they could worship. She even came to be known as 'the mother of all the Buddhas', because one could say that a Buddha is (metaphorically speaking) 'born' from transcendent wisdom. So the Perfection of Wisdom is known as 'The book that became a goddess'.

This is well worth remembering when we encounter the myriad figures of Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism. They can all seem a bit much. Especially the blue ones with several heads, many arms and various implements, even weapons! (And, of course, they're not to be taken literally.)

The mandala of the five Buddhas

I want to conclude by introducing five of the most fundamental figures in Tantric Buddhism: the mandala of the Five Buddhas. Many of you will be familiar with them, so central are they to our understanding of Dharma in Triratna. There's been a particularly strong tradition of connection with these figures here in Bristol. About 15 or so years ago there was a whole year devoted to exploring the mandala and around that time Kumuda painted five large paintings of the five Buddhas. The one on the shrine at present is Vairocana, known as 'the Illuminator', who sits at the centre of the mandala as the embodiment of the pure white illuminating light of the Buddha's wisdom. (In the reception room we have the second set of five paintings which Kumuda made, representing 'female consorts' of the five Buddhas.) In the Tibetan tradition, the masculine figures are associated with compassion and the feminine ones with wisdom, prajna. So the five paintings in our reception room are the five 'prajnas' or wisdoms. Much of what I'm going to say about the five Buddhas largely applies to them too, in terms of symbolism.

So. We have Vairocana, right at the heart of the mandala, connecting with the 'Buddha family', linking us back with the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni.

It's traditional to enter the mandala in the east, so next we have the dark blue Buddha, Akshobya, whose name means 'unshakeable' or 'immovable'. He is the head of the 'Vajra' family and he transforms the poison of hatred into a mirror-like wisdom.

We make our way clockwise round the mandala and next come to the golden-yellow Buddha of the southern realm, Ratnasambhava, the 'jewel born'. He is the head of the 'Ratna' or 'jewel' family. He transforms the poison of pride into generosity and abundance.

Next is the red Buddha, Amitabha, 'infinite light', in the Western realm. He presides over the 'lotus family' and transforms craving into loving-kindness. He is associated with meditation, friendship and compassion.

And finally, in the north, we find the dark green Buddha, Amoghasiddhi whose name means 'unstoppable success'. He's the head of the 'vishva (double) vajra' family and transforms the poisons of fear and envy into virya, energy in pursuit of the good.



(This illustration can be a bit confusing as although Akshobya IS in the eastern realm, in traditional iconography of the mandala, the east is at the bottom!)

Imagining our own mandala – and connections with the Buddha qualities

We can use the image of the mandala in our imaginations, in our spiritual life, both as a way of making sense of our *own* conflicting energies, but also as a way of understanding when someone else seems to be 'coming at' something from a very different angle to us. It can be used as a way of understanding and working with those polarities we spoke of last week – eg recognising that whilst we may have a strong need for clarity and facts in a situation ('eastern realm'), a friend may have a very different need eg for empathy ('western realm'). All our endeavours to engage with them by offering more and more clarity *might not work* because they are different to us! Jvalamalini and I have had a lot of fun with this over the many years of our friendship – we've always strongly met 'in the centre of the mandala' but we now know that we each approach from 'polar opposite realms'. She has a strong heart-connection with the western realm of Amitabha, the lotus family, whereas I've tended to approach things more from the aversive/Akshobya/vajra kind of angle, the eastern realm.

None of this is static, and ultimately we all have – and need to connect with – all aspects of the mandala. But it's good to know where we – and our friends – are starting from. So.

You might like to have a think about 'what aspect of enlightenment – or 'the enlightened mind' you would choose to put 'at the heart of things', in the centre of your 'personal mandala'. It may be that one or other of the figures – or energies – I've just been describing speaks to you. And you can play around with the images and the colours. You can play around in your own imagination and see what awakens the 'kings and queens of your energies'. It's also good to notice what you most *react* to, or what you most dislike – there's generally a *lot* of energy there and plenty of rich 'fuel' for transformation!