

Mingyur Rinpoche's explanation of the 'Four Powers' excerpted from his upcoming book *Crossing Over, From Confusion To Clarity*, written with Helen Tworikov. (to be published by Shambhala Publications in late 2013)

The Four Powers

Within this practice, there are four approaches to purification. Each one was generated by the particular circumstances of four of the Buddha's disciples. They are called the Power of Support, the Power of Remorse, the Power of the Antidote and the Power of Resolve.

1) The Power of Support

Vajrasattva practice begins by acknowledging all the things we do that create suffering. In our ordinary, deluded, samsaric state of mind, we know this to be true. For this reason we need support. Generally we cannot meet this challenge on our own in ways that effectively alleviate negative feelings. The Power of Support has two aspects. We start with relative aspiration bodhichitta: Why do you want to do this practice? Who are you practicing for? I want to do this purification practice so that I will become enlightened and will help all beings get enlightened. This establishes our immeasurable motivation and fortifies our commitment. This support comes from our side.

The second support comes from Vajrasattva. We imagine that he is sitting just above our heads. Vajrasattva becomes the object of our confessions—a stable, non-judgmental, compassionate witness to support us in our efforts to repair any physical or emotional damage that we have intentionally or innocently caused in this or previous lives. We turn to Vajrasattva, who reflects back to us the courage to witness our negative activities with compassion, wisdom and equanimity and he helps us connect to our own original purity.

Imagining Vajrasattva

Vajrasattva sits right above us facing the same direction as we do. He is the union of emptiness and clarity. Imagine him as translucent white in color, dazzling but without substance, like the image in a mirror; or like a rainbow; or like a hologram, vivid in appearance, yet empty. His face is peaceful, with a slight smile. Remember not to make

the visualization too tight. Develop a vibrant sense of Vajrasattva's presence without getting entangled in every little detail. Our own conviction of his presence is the critical element to making this an effective and transformative exercise. Above our head, maybe two or four inches, is a white lotus flower with a moon disk. Again, the lotus represents abiding in samsara but not being attached to it, and conveys the enlightened activities of the buddhas. On this throne Vajrasattva sits with his legs loosely crossed, and with the right foot slightly extended in front, in what is sometimes called, "the Sattva posture." (image tk) His right hand holds a vajra at his heart center. His left rests on his hip holding an upturned silver bell. The vajra represents compassion and clarity; the bell represents emptiness and wisdom. The image is the union of emptiness and appearance. Vajrasattva is not one separate deity. Rays of light emanate from Vajrasattva's heart center, inviting the assembly of wisdom deities, who merge with him to become the essence of all the buddhas.

Upside Down Vajrasattva

I started this practice with my father when I was still living at Nagi Gomba. At first I could not imagine Vajrasattva very clearly. Some days I tried so hard, my mind went blank. I could not imagine anything. I complained to my father that I could not do this practice. He would tell me, "Just relax. Relax your mind. You are trying too hard." I followed my father's instructions, and within a few weeks my Vajrasattva image became really clear. Perfect. Fantastic. I went back to my father and told him that I had become very good at imagining Vajrasattva above my head. I could imagine the lotus discs and the colors, the bell and the vajra—everything. He told me, "Oh that's very nice, very nice. Now imagine Vajrasattva upside down."

I went away feeling deflated, hopeless. I could not figure out why my father had told me this. I was determined to follow his instructions but after a few days, I went back to my father and told him, "I really tried, but I cannot imagine Vajrasattva upside down."

"Imagination is not real," my father explained to me. "It is like the moon's reflection in the lake. It can move, it can become wavy, it can change. That's its nature. So you do not have to hold the image in such a fixed, tight way. Getting the image *perfect* is not the point. It's more important to feel the presence of the buddhas." Always try to

feel the animated presence of the buddhas. This is more important than perfecting the image.

Missing the Point

Some of my own students have missed this point. Their stories are funny, but reveal a very literal, rigid idea of how to work with imagination. One woman told me that she had practiced in her car as she commuted to and from work. But she had to stop. “The car ceiling was too low. I could not fit Vajrasattva between my head and the ceiling. So I raised him above the top of the car, on the outside, but when the car went very fast, or stopped very suddenly, he fell down. So I stopped practicing.”

One time I gave this teaching in India. One guy told me, “This is exactly the practice that I need.” But after a few days he said, “I cannot practice Vajrasattva because I do not have any hair. When I was young I had a lot of hair. Now I lost my hair so it’s too late.”

I couldn’t figure out what he was talking about. Finally, I asked him, “What does hair have to do with Vajrasattva practice?”

“Vajrasattva keeps sliding off my bald head. I do not have enough hair to hold him in place,” he explained.

I told him Vajrasattva is not solid. There is no substance glued to the top of your head. “Vajrasattva cannot fall. He is just in your mind.”

“Oh yeah...I forgot that part,” he said. Please don’t forget that part.

Now we have established both the support that comes from us in the form of the bodhichitta motivation, and the support that comes from Vajrasattva. Now we move to the next approach.

2) The Power of Remorse

Of the stories that pertain to the disciples of the historical Buddha that developed into the Four Powers, Angulimala’s story is the most well-known and most dramatic. Angulimala, under the misguided direction of one of his professors at the legendary university of Taxila—which stood in what today is part of Pakistan—set out to kill one thousand people. He was only one short of completing his mission when he saw a monk

walking way ahead of him on the road. Angulimala was so happy. Even though Angulimala trusted his professor enough to commit these deadly acts, he was beset with doubts, so he was relieved that his days of destruction would soon be over. He already had nine hundred and ninety nine fingers around his neck—his name, Angulimala, means “garland of fingers.” Now he had his last victim in sight, and could bring his killing spree to an end. But however fast he ran toward the monk, he could not catch up. Soon he was almost out of breath but the monk just maintained his same slow pace. Finally Angulimala yelled out, “Hey you, wait up!” The monk continued. Angulimala yelled again. “What is the matter with you? Why don’t you stop?”

The monk continued to walk and without turning around he said, “I did stop, Angulimala. You should stop too.”

“That’s strange,” thought Angulimala to himself. “He says that he stopped but he is still walking. Is he a monk who lies?” Angulimala continued to run very fast and the monk continued to walk very slowly. Then from afar, he called to the monk, “What did you mean ‘I stopped?’ You’re still walking.”

And the monk replied, “I stopped creating suffering for myself and others. But you, Angulimala, are busy running here and there with so much fear and anguish in your mind.”

Then Angulimala thought, “Wow, he knows my situation. He understands my mind.” Angulimala began to slow down and the monk turned to face him and allowed him to catch up. When Angulimala got close enough, he saw that the monk was Shakyamuni Buddha. The Buddha appeared peaceful and contented. He smiled at the man with nine hundred and ninety nine fingers around his neck. No one had looked at Angulimala with such kindness for a long time, and all his murderous intentions melted away. The Buddha said to him: “You must stop killing. This is not right. You are causing so much harm to yourself and others.” Then Angulimala understood that his teacher had tricked him. He became distraught, overwhelmed by despair, and horrified by his behavior. At that moment, it was impossible for Angulimala to imagine that there could be a shred of anything worthwhile in his destructive behavior.

We too might assume that there was no wisdom to be found in Angulimala’s actions. As my father told me, normally we do not bother to look for goodness in

negative action. We do not look for it in ourselves or in others. That's a mistake, because there is always one excellent quality present—even for a serial killer like Angulimala: every negative act has within it the seed of purification. There is no such thing as absolute negativity. There is no absolute bad karma. Impossible. This is not just uplifting, feel-good spiritual therapy. This understanding is completely integrated with the truth of Dharma. If you do not believe in the possibility of purification for the very most terrible acts, then you cannot accept the relative truth of impermanence, which rests with the absolute truth of emptiness. Nothing stays the same and that includes negative karma. Whether or not that seed of purification will ripen depends on how we deal with our negativities. But we must deeply know that we have the capacity for purification, just as we have the capacity for liberation. The Buddha saw that Angulimala clearly recognized his own predicament, that he took responsibility for his actions, and that he was sincere in his wish to make amends.

Not long after his initial encounter with the Buddha, Angulimala shaved his head and became a monk. He never killed again but his mind remained tormented by his memories of his victims. The Buddha explained the truth of emptiness, the impermanent nature of all phenomena, and the capacity for purification, but the Buddha could not just wave a wand and wash away Angulimala's bad karma and restore him to sanity. Angulimala had his work cut out for him: to transform guilt and remorse into positive qualities. That was his special challenge, and since he had killed nine hundred and ninety nine people, we can imagine what a mountain of a challenge he faced. Eventually Angulimala used remorse to transform guilt and shame into wisdom and compassion, and Angulimala's transformation forms the basis for the approach to purification that, in *ngondro*, we call *The Power of Remorse*.

When we commit acts that violate our own sense of right and wrong, like Angulimala, we feel guilt and shame. But feeling bad does not necessarily inspire our determination never to repeat that behavior, or make us commit to purifying the negative karma that we have created. With the feeling of remorse comes the possibility for change. We recognize the suffering we have caused. We wish that we had not done this. We sincerely pray that we not repeat this in the future, and we aspire to purify the karma that we created. We cannot remember every little detail from this life, every little white lie or

every mosquito that we killed, and we certainly cannot remember what we did in our past lives. So don't get hung up on the details. We can just aspire to purify whatever bad karma we've made in this life—and past lives—for the benefit of bringing all sentient beings to enlightenment.

Regret and Remorse

In English regret and remorse are sometimes used interchangeably. My own understanding suggests that regret is more for neutral or less consequential situations, such as “I regret that I cannot attend your dinner party.” Or we might regret that a movie we wanted to see is no longer showing. “Regret” includes things that happen unintentionally. If we bump into someone, or if a piece of our luggage falls off the train rack, we express regret although these actions occurred without intention. Remorse cuts deeper. It arises when we feel badly about behavior that was intended to cause harm. Between these two usages, we can assume that Angulimala suffered remorse. But how can such an intense, powerful experience of negativity be transformed?

Let's try to distinguish between remorse and guilt, at least as I am using them here. Angulimala's situation was pretty extreme, so perhaps you can think of something from your own life. Is there some incident that continues to haunt you? Anything that involves killing, maybe of animals, or of stealing or of lying, slander, malicious gossip or sexual misconduct that caused you or others mental or physical suffering? Consider what you usually do with this, how you normally relate to this action. One common strategy is to avoid it. The event comes to mind, but the mind backs away. You know the way your hand leaps in front of your face to protect it from dirt kicked up by a passing truck? It's a kind of flinching motion. That's often the mind's response to guilt. The old image, or mental movie of our action is too disturbing to watch, but we feel the discomfort nonetheless. Our mind becomes gripped by the feeling, but with no release.

Another response to an action that disturbs our equanimity is to replay it over and over again. In the first case, we cannot look at it. Here, we cannot stop looking at it. Negative emotional associations may erupt repeatedly, but we still end up watching another movie in which we are the main character. We watch ourselves over and over. Yet there is no exit from this loop, and nagging self-recrimination persists.

So how can we use remorse to alleviate the suffering rather than allow it to keep us stuck in guilt? We do this through the wisdom of awareness. We need to separate guilt from remorse. Guilt keeps the focus on our personal emotional response. This can happen so thoroughly, that the emotion takes on a life of its own. This leaves no room for a corrective impulse. Try looking directly at a troublesome activity without judgment. Don't try to understand, judge, or change it. Just review it. With the calm abiding mind of shamata, we watch the activity as if standing on the reviewing platform of a parade; or as if standing on the bank of a river without being carried away by the current. The story may have a lot of emotional force, but we apply the same meditation that we use for awareness with object. And remember, all this time Vajrasattva sits just above our head, ready to support our every effort. He too is witnessing, but not judging. His kindness and compassion does not differentiate between "victim" and "perpetrator." Seeing our innate purity, he aspires for us to see our innate purity and his wish for all beings to attain enlightenment radiates without discrimination.

Using this excellent support, try to stay with witnessing. Shamata should make it easier to recognize when our minds step away from witnessing and get caught by the story, or slips into aversion and tries to flinch away from just watching. See if you can create some space between the action and the emotional drama that has fueled the story. See if you can break the pattern of empowering the action with emotional energy. In this way remorse creates the context out of which comes the recognition of what we have done and what we can do about it. Remorse that acknowledges our negative behavior now becomes our ally; and Vajrasattva becomes the vehicle by which we reorient our behavior from non-virtuous to virtuous action. Remorse—not the emotional grip of shame and guilt—allows for purification; and therefore allows us to move forward.

One woman made an appointment to tell me that she had searched through her entire life, "...and I cannot find one thing to purify." I said maybe she had accidentally caused some harm to bugs when she was driving, maybe from the tires or windshield. Many students use Vajrasattva to purify their role in the countless deaths of insects, moths, mice or ants. I have heard so many different strategies for getting rid of insects and rodents that I could become an exterminator consultant! One student came to Bodhi Gaya for a month-long course on *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, the supreme text by the

eighth-century Indian master Shantideva. One evening she was studying the text in her room, and became so infuriated by a mosquito that when she finally saw it land near the ceiling, she threw the Shantideva book at it. A splat of red appeared, but it was too high for her to clean. For the rest of her stay, she had to endure a daily reminder of both her act, and her impulsive choice of weapon—which made her particularly remorseful.

Some people keep cats so that they can kill the mice, and not stain their own karma. Other people keep their cats indoors to spare their prey—and their karma. One thing about working with insects or small rodents: do not get overwhelmed by the details. In general, this is true for any subject, but particularly here. If you try to recall every instance of killing a bug it might take the rest of your life. Keep it simple. For example, “I am truly sorry for the lives I have taken.”

A Jewelry Thief

People often come to Dharma after their lives fall apart. One of the most extreme examples I know concerns a kleptomaniac—a compulsive stealer. This woman would steal jewelry from department stores that cost hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars: earrings, rings bracelets. She had been the financial officer of a corporation and had earned a good salary. Her behavior had nothing to do with lack of money. She understood that it was a sickness, an addiction, but she could not control it. She was very tall with black hair pulled back into an elegant bun, and she had a commanding, almost regal posture, self-assured and confident. She attributed her long string of successful robberies to her appearance. She did not look like a thief and salespeople did not keep their eyes on her. But one day a hidden surveillance camera photographed her slipping an expensive necklace into her purse. Her husband of more than twenty years had no idea that his wife had this problem. Her teenage children were horrified, as her arrest became an item in the newspapers. As you can image, the whole thing was a big mess. She did not steal after that, but her entire life fell apart.

Like Angulimala, this woman had to learn to replay her story as a series of still images on the old-fashioned movie reels—one image at a time—until she could separate the events themselves from their emotional energy. Once we allow our minds to abide in the awareness of witnessing, and we no longer succumb to aversion or attachment, *then*

we can access the wisdom of remorse. If we remain so afraid of what we have done, or enthralled by the power of guilt and shame, then we cannot really assess our actions. But now we can calmly investigate and recognize their negative effects. With this, remorse becomes the catalyst for change. Again, Vajrasattva is there to support us. Remorse allows us to understand and accept the harm without getting carried away endlessly by the emotional heat of the story. Now we have a way to see the story without grasping.

The power of remorse also counters any possibility of feeling good about bad deeds. Outwitting a competitor through trickery may generate complacency or pride, yet if we congratulate ourselves for being wizards of deception, we will not let go of the habit of harming. If we give ourselves a hero's welcome after contributing to the downfall of an enemy, we intensify the emotional forces that are our true opponents.

As effective as the power of remorse can be, it is not enough to purify eons of bad karma. We need the Power of the Antidote as well, which comes next. Before we continue, I want to go over some practical points about the practice. When we sit down to do Vajrasattva practice we first invoke bodhichitta motivation. We clarify why we are doing this practice. Who we are doing this for and what is our aspiration? This is the first part of the Power of Support. For the second part we imagine Vajrasattva above our heads. For the Power of Remorse we can spend one or two minutes recalling a particular action that we regret having done. If we have the time, we can spend five or ten minutes reviewing the action without being swept up in it. If we are working with a particularly difficult situation, we set aside more time. If we have a situation like Angulimala's, we set aside a lot of time! There is no fixed recommendation. But before moving into the Power of the Antidote, it can be very helpful to identify some activity, emotion, or illness that we specifically wish to purify. We can proceed with a generalized aspiration, thinking, "Whatever harm I caused or may have caused to any sentient being in all my past, whatever negative karma I have accumulated, I pray that it may now be purified for the benefit of all sentient beings." This is fine. It may change. Some people start this way before connecting with a specific event that may be deeply buried. But when particular issues appear on the surface of your memory, I suggest working with them. Now we are ready for the actual purification. Remorse creates the urgency and determination for purification.

3) The Power of the Antidote

(Sanskrit and English translation of the Vajrasattva mantra for Appendix tk)

We use the term “antidote” here to mean the opposite of negativity in the same way that water is the antidote to fire, or the way that light dispels darkness.

Here, we use imagination and mantra as the antidote for negativity.

Vajrasattva appears very real, but like a hologram or reflection, with no blood and bones, no substance. Then we add a moon disc at the center of Vajrasattva’s heart. Upon this disk is written the letter *hung* (illustration tk) in the same translucent white as Vajrasattva’s body. The letters of the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra are coiled, snake-like, around the *hung* in a counter clockwise direction.

The mantra embodies the union of wisdom, compassion, and the essence of all the buddhas, as well as that of the sublime enlightened beings and our gurus and teachers. While we recite the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra, the force of our devotion and sincerity activates the mantra at the center of Vajrasattva’s heart. The mantra begins to rotate around the letter *hung*. With this, the collective wisdom of enlightened beings is released from the letters in the form of pure nectar. The recitation can be done at any point in the practice. It is not tied to a specific part.

This nectar is not quite like water, but more like liquid light, brilliant, shimmering and transparent. The nectar too is the essence of all the buddhas and of wisdom and compassion and of all the enlightened beings. Of course, wisdom doesn’t have form and color; compassion doesn’t have form and color. But when we take imagination as path, we are free to give form to wisdom and compassion and in order to inspire our practice. The nectar slowly fills Vajrasattva from his toes up to the top of his head. Within the stream of this nectar flows the wisdom, compassion and power of Vajrasattva’s Buddha-mind, filling his translucent body. Even the syllable *hung* and the one-hundred-syllable mantra sink into the nectar as it reaches his heart area. The level of nectar gets higher and higher, until even one more thimble of nectar cannot fit in. Then it descends from the top to the bottom of his body and leaves through the big toe of his right foot, and enters the crown of our head.

Nectar Descending

We imagine this nectar seeping into every cell and tissue of our bodies. It makes its way into all our channels. Our veins and arteries run with it. It fills the area behind our eyes and seeps deep into our ears. It fills our nasal passages, our throats and the roots of our teeth, and the grey matter of our brains. It finds its way into the space between our muscles. Our bones and marrow are saturated with this nectar. We imagine this with great clarity while we recite the mantra. At the same time, we imagine that all the deeds that we have ever done that harmed ourselves and others, all our guilt, bad feelings, sicknesses of mind and body, are all being flushed out, leaving through every pore and orifice in the form of muddy soot, or sludge, like ink mixed with ash. When the soot seeps down the outside and inside of our bodies, down to our toes, we imagine that it continues descending to the bowels of the earth, where it is neutralized. Nectar descending functions to purify and to transform. With the help and blessings of all the buddhas, manifesting as Vajrasattva, and inspired by our genuine remorse, we ask—of ourselves and of the deities—that purification be granted. The effort, intention and motivation must be made from our side.

If you have a physical ailment, such as a lung infection, a tumor, a toothache or a back problem, bring your attention to the area of illness or discomfort as the nectar descends. Maintain the recitation, but allow your awareness to stay with the ailment. Then imagine the nectar washing this area and imagine the illness leaving your body in the form of muddy soot. This practice can be very beneficial but please do not substitute it for medical advice or prescriptions. A lot of the effectiveness of purification depends on our intentions and motivations but also on our capacities. While the potential for what we can accomplish is limitless, at this point, our capacities may be limited.

I want to add that any activity done with the intention of helping others will offset negative karma. Just as light dispels darkness, or generosity dispels stinginess, virtuous behavior dispels non-virtuous behavior. All the paramitas—generosity, discipline, patience, right effort, meditation, and wisdom—remove negativities. The same is true for the ten virtues: refraining from killing, stealing, lying and so forth. Any of the virtues that accumulate good karma will simultaneously counter or dissolve

negative karma. So although we work with nectar in our Vajrayana-imagination ngondro practice, it is not the only antidote to our negativities.

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We enlist Vajrasattva, along with the four powers, for the benefits of purification. But there are multiple positive results.

1. The process of imagination of the deity helps cultivate our shamata practice. We can use a general image of the deity or select any particular aspect within the image as support for our awareness. Or we can use the sensation of nectar descending into our bodies, or the sensation of the soot oozing out of our pores, or we can use the sound of the mantra. We can also allow the mind to move away from a specific object and to rest into objectless awareness. In general, all these practices are about cultivating awareness because in our daily lives, it is awareness that brings about real change and that can reorient our lives away from confusion and toward clarity. We cannot engage in that process without meditative awareness, so there is nothing more beneficial than this.
2. Because we set our intention with bodhichitta, we cultivate the good karma that comes with aspiring to help all beings attain enlightenment. This alone creates virtue and is an antidote to our negativities.
3. We cultivate vipashyana practice in the process of the imagining Vajrasattva. Using our imaginative powers to invoke and dissolve the image of Vajrasattva provides what we need to know about how our minds work in everyday life. We continually compose and dissolve realities. Yet in ordinary life we are not encouraged to explore this. We need a kind of laboratory of the mind in which we can creatively experiment, and imagination practice provides that laboratory. It helps us recognize that form is never separate from emptiness. This is the union of emptiness and clarity, and the recognition of this union comes from wisdom. Wisdom recognizes emptiness as well as the union of form/clarity and emptiness.

The recognition that forms arise from emptiness, and the recognition of the union of emptiness and clarity, requires wisdom—and it further cultivates wisdom and stabilizes it. The awareness that we access through shamata supports this recognition.

4. We accumulate merit and virtue through the aspiration to purify ourselves for others. This tends to relate to specific actions. When we add the bodhichitta aspiration, we expand our own motivation to purify ourselves in order to recognize our own true nature, and to bring an end to suffering for ourselves and all sentient beings.