

~ *The Vajrayana Path* ~

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In the Tibetan tradition you could say, taking the bird's eye view, there are two main approaches. We oftentimes hear this term *Vajrayana Buddhism* when we talk about the different forms of Buddhism you find in the world, and you might have heard Tibetan Buddhism referred to as the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition. In a sense that is true because you do have these Vajrayana teachings perhaps in the fullest form that we currently have in the modern world preserved in the Tibetan tradition.

But it is not an entirely accurate portrayal of what the tradition is. Because, more accurately, you could say it is a three yana tradition. *Yana* is a term that just means *vehicle*, or another way of just saying a particular approach or form of Buddhist practice. In Tibet, really what you have are three different approaches that are rolled into one. And the Vajrayana piece, which we are focusing on here, is just one of those three.

To simplify it even more, you could say that you have the Vajrayana and the other two yanas, which you could call the Hinayana and the Mahayana, you could roll together. I am throwing a lot of jargon at you here but I will explain a little bit.

You could say the first two yanas, the first two approaches, together form what we call the causal approach. Whereas the Vajrayana approach is a fruitional approach. What that means is that in two of the approaches that we find present in the Tibetan tradition, the way that the path is formulated is a process of setting in place the causes and conditions for enlightenment to unfold. Enlightenment being something that we reach as an attainment or fruition in the future. In other words, we do things in the present that are leading us towards the state of enlightenment. For example, we could have the six paramitas—generosity, discipline, patience, perseverance, meditation or concentration, and insight. And we do all these practices as a way to lead us towards enlightenment.

The fruitional approach has many of the same features on the surface, but in a way is radically different in that the assumption is not that enlightenment is going to be reached off in the future, but rather that enlightenment, the awakened state, buddhahood, is something that is present in each of us every moment. Not only human beings but even animals, every form of sentient life, from an insect up to the Buddha, has as their basic fundamental nature this awakened state. There is nothing, as Tim said, no matter how turbulent our thoughts, our feelings, our emotions are, nothing, really can harm, change, or make worse this fundamental purity of our true nature.

The path then, from this point of view, is not necessarily going somewhere else. It is not as though we are somehow working toward something in the future. It is a process of fully tuning into, getting in touch with, exploring the fullness, the richness, of who and what we are. And all the practices that we do—so again we might have on the surface all these practices that look similar to this more causal approach—but here the practices are just different windows into that basic nature. They are just different unique ways, different twists on the same theme of how can we get fully in touch with this basic purity, this basic radiance of our own awareness.

So all these teachings that we have received here at St. John's have this basic thread running through them of being these very direct, pithy yet utterly profound ways to just connect very simply with that pure awareness that is always with us. If we are really going to boil it down to one word, of everything that we are doing both here in what we call Nature of Mind practice but starting with Joy of Living level 1, as Tim mentioned, is just exploring awareness.

Then in the Vajrayana tradition, to flesh that out a little bit more, you have all sorts of different tools in the Vajrayana tool-box that, because we are all different, because each of us is bringing to the table different emotions, different feelings, different thought patterns, different life experiences, we have a really rich tool-box that gives us a lot to work with. It gives us different ways to connect in with that basic purity and basic radiance of awareness.

At a general level you could say that we have one form of practice that is working with perception, with the way we see and experience our world. We have another form of practice that is connecting with our sense of embodiment, especially with the subtle energetic body. And then we have a third form of practice that is really the focal point of these retreats, which is going straight to the nature of mind itself.

In the first form that I mentioned, which is working with perception, are terms you may be familiar with such as sadhana practice, development stage (which is called *bskyed rim* in Tibetan), deity yoga. There are a lot of different words and terms we can throw around. But this is all pointing to a lot of the imagery you see in the Tibetan tradition. You have these thangka paintings of deities, and mantra recitation. This is more the element of working with the ways things appear, sound, etc. And it seems on the surface it may perhaps not be clear what the connection is between all that and this very simple, direct nature of mind that Rinpoche is always coming back to.

But one way of looking at that aspect of the practice is that it is using, and this is something you find throughout the Vajrayana approach, it is using something that is already happening in our experience. It is just channeling that back to the sense of recognition. Or another way of saying it, guiding us back to that recognition of our true nature. And in this case, all the imagery is using some basic impulse that is happening all the time, which is that our minds are constantly making associations. We see something and we immediately imbue it with some sort of meaning that is based on our past experiences, all of our thoughts, feelings, habitual patterns, the culture we live in, all of that. And we lump all of that together into one unified experience.

Our mind is constantly mixing together what we perceive, what we see, hear, smell, feel, etcetera, with our concepts, memories, etc. To take a simple example in a mundane sense, if you take a Coke can, just the red-and-white imagery on a Coke can, this is something at least in American culture we grew up with and it has all sorts of meaning. We could just see the little red-and-white swirl and not even the word Coke and it brings all sorts of memories and associations for us.

In the Vajrayana tradition, we harness this power of the mind. We are actually using the power of this associative quality of our experience. We just use that as a gateway into recognizing our true nature. Rather than our having a deity and seeing this as something outside of ourselves, we see that, for example, if you have some deities with four arms, that actually is symbolic of the Four Immeasurables—the prayer that we chanted at the beginning of the session today and that we learned in the Joy of Living level 2. Rather than working with this in a more cognitive way or in a felt, emotional way, we are using this associative quality of the mind. We are seeing that we are the Four Immeasurables in that sense. These four arms, it is not some hard and fast reality and it certainly is not something outside, some external force. It is rather embodying these qualities and principles of our own awakened nature.

That is one way that this plays out in the Vajrayana tradition, a way that we use imagery, we use our imagination, we use symbol, etc. The second form, and this is what we would call the completion stage, or you sometimes hear these Sanskrit terms *prana*, *nadi*, and *bindu*, which is just talking about the subtle energetic body, the channels, the winds, the essences. In this form of practice, we are working directly with the felt, embodied quality of the awakened nature, specifically, with all of the blockages we can feel that can take place locking in nonrecognition. The way that *not* being in touch with our awakened nature manifests in our body. The path, from that point of view, is a way of working with that, getting in tune with our subtle body and beginning to bring that sense of recognition, that sense of fully being with who and what we are at the broadest possible level, into our embodied experience.

That is the second form of practice that we find in the Vajrayana tradition. The third—and this is considered the most direct, the most profound, and I think in the modern world you could say the easiest to integrate, the easiest to bring into our busy, hectic lives, is just going straight to the nature of mind itself. Here—and we can see this from the very beginning, with what Tim said, with what Mingyur Rinpoche talked about. We can see that everything we experience in our lives, rather than being seen as a problem, rather than being seen as something we need to fix or do away with or change such that [life] becomes something like an endless quest of problems that we have to solve to reach some future happiness, we start

seeing that not only do we not need to fix ourselves, but all these things that we thought were problems, all these things that we thought were issues that we somehow needed to confront and deal with before we could taste some sense of lasting wellbeing—all of that actually can be taken as a support for awareness and eventually not only tolerated, but fully appreciated, even with a sense of gratitude, a sense of lightness and humor.

We can fully hold all that in our experience as the radiance, as the play of our own awareness. This is something that Tsoknyi Rinpoche will probably talk a lot about. It is a radical opening up of our experience, it is a radical allowing for everything to be simply as it is, and seeing enlightenment not as a future goal to attain but something we can touch in with each and every moment.

Those are the broad strokes of the Vajrayana path. It is sometimes helpful to keep in mind, especially when you see all the imagery, all these other forms of practice, the contemplations, the chants, everything we do, especially here in the Tergar sangha, with the inspiration of Mingyur Rinpoche, although it might seem very complex and at the beginning might seem unfamiliar, it is all in the service of exploring and getting in touch with this basic purity of awareness. In a way, it is very complex, just like the waves on the surface of the ocean seem very complex at the beginning. But in a way we are only doing one practice.

There is only one thing to do on this entire path, which is just to get in touch with awareness and then just nurture that recognition. For each of us, that is going to play out in a different way. For each of us, there are going to be different practices that we are going to find helpful, and that will resonate with us. But really, that is what we are doing. From A to Z, it is just about getting in touch with awareness.