

## Initiation and Transmission

Initiation, or 'empowerment', is the cornerstone of vajrayana Buddhism. It is, at one and the same time, the most ordinary of things and the most extraordinary. It is ordinary inasmuch as it resembles many other human learning processes in which wiser and more experienced people introduce the novice step by step to the skills and mysteries of their art. With mastery of each stage come certain insignia of success and qualification to enter the next phase of training. Yet Buddhist initiation is also something quite unique and extraordinary, because the skills acquired are those of mastering one's own mind and these are like none other on Earth. They concern understanding and then purifying the whole process of perception. Empowerments are given at key moments in this process, to open doors to the most profound spiritual experiences and insights known to humankind.

Each of the four levels of tantra (*kriya*, *carya*, *yoga* and *anuttara*) has its own ways of conferring empowerment and within each system there are many different empowerments, at least one for each 'divinity'. Here the word divinity (*lha*) means one of the thousands of different forms — sometimes peaceful, sometimes wrathful — adopted by the Buddha to teach beings specific spiritual skills.

All initiation rituals can be considered globally as having four main parts, known as the *physical*, *verbal*, *wisdom* and *word* empowerments. This being said, the ritual objects used and the ceremonies themselves vary enormously from tradition to tradition. Above and beyond these formal empowerments, there is *the* ultimate empowerment, through which the disciple is introduced irreversibly to the transcendent reality (*mahamudra*) underpinning all existence. By the very nature of its totality, this automatically includes the *physical*, *verbal*, *wisdom* and *word* empowerments. It is an initiation which can be conferred whenever the disciple is ready.

The physical initiation is known as the *vase* empowerment, since it is mostly given by the guru pouring consecrated water from a metal vase into the disciple's hand, to be drunk, and by the vase being placed on the disciple's head. The teachings and insight accompanying this first empowerment reveal the innate sacredness of the human body, as well as that of the entire body of the universe. Those disciples unable to grasp the meaning immediately are entitled, through the empowerment ritual, to practise specific visualisations through which they gradually open their mind to the

universal sacredness. This first empowerment often includes an introduction to the five buddha families and their relationships with the five primordial wisdoms and the five poisons prevalent in the human mind.

The speech empowerment is usually conferred by the guru placing consecrated nectar, from a skull cup (representing the death of egotism), on the disciple's tongue. The accompanying insight is concerned with 'speech' in its broadest sense of communication, i.e. a knowledge of the relationships and connections which exist between all the things of the universe. Of particular interest is the parallelism between the microcosm of the human body and the macrocosmic universe and the way in which the ordering of the human metabolism and nervous system can affect perception of reality. The disciple who cannot grasp the meaning immediately is empowered, by this ceremony, to meditate progressively on the subtle channels and energies within the yogic body, until such time as the microcosm-macrocosm link is crystal clear.

The mind empowerment is an introduction to primordial wisdom itself. Conferred through vajra and bell or a torii or through sitting in meditation, it is particularly concerned with bliss, both physical and mental, revealing bliss to be the true nature of reality and the hidden, but real, nature of existence. Those who do not realise this immediately are empowered to practise the secret and profound methods for mastery of bliss by purification of the quintessential substances found in the yogic body.

The word empowerment, conferred through a few powerful words pointing to the nature of truth, shows that the first three empowerments are not separate things, but rather three facets of the one, ultimate reality of mahamudra.

In early times, in India, it seems to have been more commonplace to give these empowerments one at a time. The disciple would practise their content, sometimes for years on end, until he or she was ready to be initiated into the next stage. In Tibet, this tradition was maintained in some instances — such as closed retreats — but was overtaken by the habit of given all empowerments at the outset.

The disciple was thereafter led through the different stages of practice by qualified teachers, but not necessarily the original empowerer. Empowerments also gradually became a less hermetic thing. In order to establish some link between ordinary people and the various profound teachings of vajrayana, most masters started giving public empowerments. These were seen as general blessings which, it was hoped, would sow the seed for the person receiving the empowerment to make a closer bond with the practice in a future life.