



Treasuring the Feminine in Vajrayana Buddhism

Symposium – 8 to 12 June 2021

A Summary

Introduction

In places, religions around the world are embracing the rise of the feminine. At the same time, more and more light is shed on unequal, disrespectful and in some cases, abusive relationships between men and women.

Vajrayana Buddhism is experiencing this force for change too. Practitioners today can benefit from the wisdom of both female and male teachers, and teachings on the feminine are published and available. And yet the largest communities or sanghas in the West have had to face in the last years distressing accounts of the behaviour of their teachers with some of their female students.

In 2019, a group of practitioners from the Rigpa community proposed to hold an ongoing dialogue across sanghas on the topic of women and the feminine in Vajrayana Buddhism. The wish was to gather and reflect on where we are at in our tradition when it comes to treasuring the feminine. It was also clear that the problems Vajrayana Buddhist communities had faced in the student-teacher relationship between men and women had been greatly amplified by the many misunderstandings about Vajrayana Buddhism itself. There was also a longing to turn to wise women in these difficult times for support and clarity.

The group chose to start from the big picture to bring context, and started with these questions: Is gender relevant in a tradition focused on non-duality? Do we understand

the feminine principle in Vajrayana Buddhism? Do we honour female practitioners and teachers of the past? What is cultural and what is Dharma when it comes to sexuality and conduct?

The dialogue across sanghas was kicked off with a small symposium of female Vajrayana teachers and senior practitioners that took place from 8 to 12 June 2021. It was hosted by Lerab Ling, Rigpa's retreat centre in the south of France, on Zoom, with 38 participants from almost 20 different sanghas.

On this occasion the main contributors were Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche, Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel, Sangye Khandro, Chagdud Khadro, Marcia Schmidt, Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Lama Tsultrim Allione, Acharya Judith Simmer-Brown—in order of intervention. [The biographies of all participants are available here.](#)

There was really no predefined outcome for the symposium other than openly sharing our understanding and also our hearts in a confidential setting. Coming together as female Vajrayana practitioners was in itself an accomplishment and an important new step.

In the end, the hot questions about whether students should accept or decline to have an intimate relationship with their teacher came up on the very first day, and by the end of the gathering we were clearly taking responsibility for ensuring the next generations of both teachers and practitioners are better equipped to prevent and face misconduct.

The participants' intention

The symposium began with participants sharing their personal intentions: creating friendship, sisterhood, community, inclusivity and support, being courageous, open and curious, speaking about deep and subtle issues, listening, sharing our assumptions, bringing clarity and insights, clarifying all the aspects of the feminine, clarifying misunderstandings about Vajrayana Buddhism, clarifying the Dharma from the cultural aspects, bringing wisdom in, rejoicing in women practitioners and teachers, empowering and educating, facing sexual abuse in sanghas, change, being of service in addressing the questions that people have asked, and especially learning and understanding from each other's living experience.

There was a sense of great openness and rawness and the possibility of stepping into a new conversation that can lead to healing.

Many questions came up: Can we come up with one or two clear points? Is this symposium a first step? Are we making a big deal of something in a way that is not helpful to those experiencing it?

The questions from our sanghas

We received over 50 questions from the communities before the event, clearly showing there was so much need for teachings and clarity on this topic. [These questions are available here](#), and were shared in advance with the symposium participants.

They clearly prompted the incredible teachings we then received. As Sangye Khandro pointed out, 'In reviewing the questions submitted by sangha members, it became really clear that the meaning of the feminine principle needs more clarification with the greater sangha community. Going forward, it is sure that these topics need to be constantly clarified, and teachings need to be made available.'

Reading this summary

This account of the symposium is shared as a support for personal reflection and further reading and study, as well as discussions with others in examining these topics in workshops and conversations.

It is an invitation to remain open in the face of complexity, to sharpen our discernment, broaden our compassion and strengthen our sense of agency. It includes extracts from the teachings of the main contributors that are accessible to a general Buddhist audience, questions for reflection, and striking main points from the group discussions.

Questions for reflection

During the symposium, the following questions were offered each day to participants to spark off reflections and discussions.

Gender & Vajrayana

- The purpose of Vajrayana practice is the dissolution of dualistic perception. The fact that we do not address gender is not an omission. And yet, in the West, it is an important discussion; the public and other Dharma practitioners are having this discussion for us. So, what happens if we don't talk about it? How is gender relevant in our tradition?
- What is the true place of women in our tradition in 2021? What do we think?
- Is there anything to learn from other spiritual traditions? How?

The Feminine Principle in Vajrayana

- What is the feminine principle in Vajrayana? And what is Vajrayana's understanding of the feminine?
- Is it understood in our sanghas?
- What is its role when addressing difficulties in sanghas and beyond?

Honouring Female Vajrayana Practitioners and Teachers of the Past

- Recounting the lives and spiritual accomplishments of the great examples from past centuries—what have we learnt?
- What have women practitioners and senior teachers learnt in the last 50 years in the East and in the West on how to hold our sanghas and transmit the lineage?

Sexuality, Culture & Conduct

- In what ways have the difficulties that arise between a student and a teacher—including the experience of abuse and sexual harassment—affected you?
- Based on your experiences, what do you think is most needed to eliminate the harm caused by these problems and to promote healing within Buddhist sanghas? What can you and what can we as a collective do to improve these problems? What is the role of the teacher, the student and the sangha in that?

Learnings

– What did I learn from this dialogue and how will I bring it back to my sangha and my teachers?

Glimpses from the main teachings

Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche opened the symposium with essential advice on courage and wisdom:

Büme sherab kyi rangshyin is a phrase we often hear whenever we come to the topic of Women and Vajrayana. But this phrase, *Büme sherab kyi rangshyin*, which means ‘the nature of the feminine is wisdom’—there are very many vast explanations of what that actually means, and it is very important and necessary that we explore the word ‘wisdom’ very carefully. Being in no hurry; to really deepen and in our deepening perhaps to inspire others, and especially women, to deepen their understanding of what that word wisdom means.

Because without quite knowing what this word actually means, and using it from the perspective of mundane, samsaric emotions, will be very similar to speaking of knowing the sky by looking at its image on a postcard.

As we all know, wisdom is sharp, wisdom is uncompromising, wisdom is the truth as it is, wisdom is alert, wisdom is alive to everything that lives and breathes around us. However, the manifestation of that wisdom, as we all know, cannot be fully expressed without courage.

Having said that, such a courage again has to be understood correctly. Such a courage is not brash; it is not the confrontational courage, which actually is sometimes the opposite of what courage actually means. Because whenever there is the brash, confrontational courage, we often fail to see that it can be more often an expression of defensiveness, or that there is a need for validation from some other source.

Dharma, Vajrayana, wisdom, is the truth as it is. Not copyrighted by anyone; they cannot be labelled as being ‘this’ or ‘that’ by anyone. What it is. And therefore, it is important that we realize true courage that sees clearly, and maybe sometimes all too clearly, the world around us; and with that courage, having that possibility to develop that confidence that does not waiver, and truly

instils within us the confidence and the courage of completeness of who we are that does not need to be validated by anyone other than the wisdom that states the truth as it is.

The first day was dedicated to the broad topic of whether gender is even relevant in Vajrayana, as the very purpose of Vajrayana practice is the dissolution of dualistic perception.

Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel accepted the challenge of giving the main teaching on this topic, showing how we can apply the view to our identity or gender, and then going on to the importance of conduct and having a correct understanding of the student-teacher relationship, reminding us also that 'the one thing the teacher is responsible for is to see if the student is really at the point where they're mature enough to engage in this kind of relationship':

I think these kinds of topics that are so loaded and juicy are the best conversations to have because there's a lot in it for us to learn and also there's something going on that needs to be looked at. (...) And I think, in this context, many powerful things can happen in talking about gender, even though our identity is not solely defined by gender. Because, 'I' or 'me' is empty of self, self-nature, or intrinsic characteristics like gender, being a woman; and our true status or identity is 'open dimensional'. Sometimes I like to use this term. We often think, 'I'm a citizen, I'm a member of a family, I'm a citizen of a town or a nation, or you know, this world.' But actually, ultimately, we are all citizens of the great nature of infinite contingencies where everything we do matters, and so this is a very powerful way to look at our identity. We're so limitless in a certain way. (...)

Is addressing the place of women relevant as a topic to Vajrayana? Yes, it is very relevant, I feel, because there's so much confusion around female students and male teachers, because this is predominantly where this problem has turned up.

But do I really think, on the other hand, essentially, that this has to do with gender? No. I don't think it has to do with gender because this can happen between any gender combination. So, my thought is that, if we want the Vajrayana to flourish, and we're concerned about women in the Dharma, the most powerful thing we can do is practise and study and embody the Dharma.

Sangye Khandro gave an all-encompassing teaching on the Feminine Principle in Vajrayana, according to Mahayana, Vajrayana and Dzogchen, and this was her conclusion.

To conclude, let's generate a sense of joy that we have been born in this precious human rebirth as a female during a time when there are so many possibilities. One of you said yesterday in our breakout group—it was just so positive—you mentioned that now everything is so much easier and how joyful it is. So, on that note, here are a few inspiring accounts based on my own experience with realized female masters.

On many occasions, I witnessed Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche, a modern tertön, rely upon his consort, the great Ḍākinī Rigzin Wangmo, who almost always accompanied him; and he relied upon her in order to carry out his enlightened deeds. When she entered the room, he would stand up and greet her with a bow and say her name. Was she well-known as a predominant figure who met the public to give transmissions? No. Most people did not even know she was there on the tour. She would only be seen publicly at the airport. But she was the symbol of the inner realization of the dharmakāya awareness, always behind the scenes practising and ensuring the purity of the environment for enlightened deeds to occur. This is what Ḍākinīs do. There is nothing wrong with that. Sogyal Rinpoche was secretly guided by her, as was Trulshik Rinpoche and others.

Another thing I wanted to mention was that during the historic sole visit to the West of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche in 1993, he was accompanied by his sister Ani Médron and his niece Ani Mumtso, who is well-known as a reincarnation of Ḍākinī Yeshe Tsogyal. I was fortunate to be the translator for most of the tour, so I basically lived with them for a couple months. I noticed how much he depended upon these two women who were more or less the ones in charge of what he was doing. In fact, at one point he canceled part of his journey since his niece was not well; and if she was not well, he was not well. After Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok passed away, Ani Mumtso was unanimously instated as the head of the Larung Gar encampment by the entire sangha of thousands of male and female practitioners. To date, she has been the only guru who confers empowerments upon the community of thousands of monks, nuns, and lay people. Even the other great and well-known khenpos, such as Tsultrim Lodrö, Sodargye, and so forth, do not give empowerment. Only she gives

empowerment. This is very inspiring, and we are also told that there are now more graduate khenmos than khenpos in the encampment.

Another example of the *ḍākinī* principal at play was the relationship between Nyoshul Khen and Sangyum Damchö, who many of you know and remember, as she was asked to marry him in order to extend his life. Why? Because she is a *ḍākinī*, and she extended his life and protected him. Does that mean he's more important than her? No, they are interdependent and nondual. (...)

Now, concerning all that can be known by the human mind, awakening wisdom *prajñā*, the feminine principle, is sublime because this alone transcends the trappings of ordinary mind and will never be discovered to exist anywhere within the phenomenal world. This alone has the full potential to transport us to the state of perfect awakening. I pray that we can all realize this potential, and that in doing so, all misunderstanding and subsequent frustration and suffering will be naturally resolved.

Chagdud Khadro shared her personal experience of honouring female Vajrayana practitioners and teachers of the past. She first recounted her own personal story and that of main women in her teacher and husband Chagdud Rinpoche's life, and then led us through this reflection on the real meaning of 'honouring':

In the meeting that preceded this symposium, I learned that Lama Chönam, Sangye Khandro's vajra companion, has written a poem calling forth the names of great dakinis, and this has been translated and made available to you. This fading of names into namelessness is a point that many biographers make, and also that the names that we still have, the stories that we have, are only the tip of what was really there.

Mandarava had 500 nuns who went into retreat with her. We've lost their names. Of the 84 Mahasiddhas, maybe 60 had dakinis as consorts, and mostly we've lost their names. Even the wisdom dakini who catalyzed the realization of Sarahapa, what was her name? We need to retrieve the stories from the past and record the more recent ones, and to allow ourselves to be inspired by the qualities and the activities of these great female practitioners. As this work continues, perhaps it's to focus on the more recent dakinis, the 19th and 20th century, before knowledge of them slips away.

As for the stories of female Vajra holders of the present: the translators, the women who manifest centres, the retreatants and teachers—we don't know exactly whose deep compassion and wisdom realization will be sources of inspiration for future practitioners. It would be useful to assemble references now, perhaps a directory similar to what Tibetan nuns have assembled as described in Holly Gayley's *Voices from Larung Gar*.

Our honouring female Vajrayana practitioners is also reflected in how we honour each other.

There was a moment in which Mandarava met with Yeshe Tsogyal, and this how they paid homage to each other's qualities. Yeshe Tsogyal extols Mandarava as the one who's accomplished deathlessness and requests teachings. (...)

And so, this honouring of each other, paying homage to the exalted qualities and activities, then promising to merge in space and emanate enlightened actions into the realms of samsaric beings, this is the way of the great dakinis.

Marcia Schmidt then taught on Sexuality, Culture & Conduct—what is cultural and what is Dharma when it comes to sexuality and conduct?

In Professor Donald Lopez's commentary on his retranslation of the Gendun Chopel's, *The Passion Book: A Guide to Love and Sex*, he writes that:

It is important to note that, despite some claims that tantric Buddhism raises the status of women, in the great majority of cases, the tantric consort is presented as an essential tool for the enlightenment of the male. Indeed, the common description of the ideal consort as a low-caste sixteen-year-old (or younger) girl is meant to suggest the miscegenation of caste mixing – the breaking of yet another taboo in order to use impurity to destroy impurity.

Professor Lopez further states that:

Although women are said to have enjoyed a higher social status in Tibet than they did in India, when Buddhism was imported from India to Tibet, many of the misogynistic aspects of Indian Buddhism came with it...

Likewise, the idea that the female was primary in these practices or an equal partner is not addressed until the 20th century, with the intimate writings of Sera Khandro, and not revealed to us until the seminal works and translations of

Professor Sarah Jacoby, particularly in *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro*. (...)

Having perfected the path of the secret empowerment, the yogi or yogini who shows signs of experience in realization can practise the wisdom knowledge empowerment. And now, here's when we get into the nitty gritty of the third empowerment where sexuality has been so much emphasized, or not emphasized, but kind of touted in Vajrayana Buddhism.

Once again, Jamgon Kongtrul explains:

When the strength of your experience and realization has greatly increased and progressed by means of having understood and grown accustomed to any of these yoga meditation and post meditation practices, including authentic accomplishment in the energies and possessing the confidence of non-transference, which are the basis for the practice of self-consecration, then the time has arrived for the practice of the third empowerment, the wisdom knowledge empowerment, which takes use of another body. This entails the stages for the accomplishment of the supremely unchanging great bliss. (...)

When I reached to that section, the third empowerment, in the *Zabtik Drolchok Tara Practice*, after the channels, winds, and essence practices, Jamgon Kongtrul states in his commentary¹:

(...) It is taught that these preliminary steps make your channels and winds flexible. They must become pliable before beginning the practice of the consort path, which is the actual practice. However, here it is necessary to first train one's own body thoroughly in being the upaya. Generally speaking, people these days do not practice with another person's body; instead, they base the path of means on their own body, while visualizing the consort. The way to do this, in brief, is as follows: Visualize yourself as Amoghasiddhi, the vajra king of steeds, and in front of you visualize Samaya Tara as a desirable maiden. (...)

But the point of all of this explanation is really to help dispel some of the mundane ideas we have about third empowerment practice and meeting consorts that embody that. It's a lot of training—it's a lot of work, you have to go

¹ *The Tara Compendium*, Rangjung Yeshe Publications, pages 65–66.

through first perfecting the secret empowerment, which is visualization exercises, combined with physical trainings. You have to show some kind of accomplishment in that before you can engage in the third empowerment.

It's not just like jumping into bed with somebody; it is really a very, very complex and serious practice that takes years and years of training.

And, of course, as with all practices, it has to be perfected by realization of the View. I think that's as much as I can explain about this particular path.

About culture

What happens when cultures clash, and the guru/disciple relationship seems to have gone off track—and the emphasis, for some reason, obviously, is in sexuality here, and I only have a few minutes. We're boxed in. All of us, or most of us, come from this Judeo Christian background with very distinct ideas about sexuality. This does not apply in other cultures. I will give an example from one of my master's sons who was from a nomadic clan. When he went back to Tibet, they were all living in tents. He noticed at night that there were these flashlights going back and forth to the tents. So, he asked, 'Hey what's happening?' They responded that there are different men that are going into tents with different women. He asked: 'Can I join in?'

But the point here is, their concept of sexuality is not in these very deep commitment, puritanical relationships. Theirs is a much lighter way. When I asked him, what do you do when you have children in situations like this? He said, well, they were just raised by the community.

When you put these opposite behaviours together and when there's a clash, and especially when we're talking about one party perceived to be in a more powerful position, its problematic. (...)

Do we really want to try to put our Lamas into our Judeo Christian boxes? That hasn't really worked for us, that's what we left. And it certainly hasn't worked in places like the Catholic Church. We came to the Dharma with a dissatisfaction of that style. It takes courage and strength to be a Dharma student, not to mention all the other characteristics. I think we have to step out of our ordinary perceptions.

On the last day, Khandro Rinpoche invited three teachers to share their perspectives on the topic of sexuality, culture and conduct: Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Lama Tsultrim Allione, and Acharya Judith Simmer-Brown.

Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo began with a strong call to be aware of imposters who present themselves as qualified lamas, as well as to name and call out bad behaviour in all teachers and practitioners.

There is a public impression of the Tibetan tradition, or Vajrayana, in Buddhist countries that is not very favorable. Tibetan Buddhism is associated with sex, pure and simple, and sexual exploitation in particular. In fact, in most Buddhist countries, Tibetan Buddhism is dismissed as not Buddhism because, especially because of the sexual symbolism and the behaviour of certain teachers and practitioners. There have been many high profile rape cases in certain countries. (...)

You know, these days, in all schools, workplaces, NGOs, sexual harassment training is now required. At my university, every single student, staff, and faculty member has to go through sexual harassment training, and pass it, in order to keep their job. This is just normal in the ordinary world today in the United States. I checked with a number of people. And I believe that this is badly needed in Buddhist centres.

Not only is sexual harassment training need, but also how to deal with sexual transgressions, how to deal with perpetrators of sexual violence, how to deal with the victims of sexual exploitation. I think also gender training is badly needed in Buddhist centres—gender training in general—because attitudes towards women are often very unhealthy, in my experience.

Lama Tsultrim Allione shared how she wrote *Women of Wisdom* because she needed the stories of women practitioners at a time when she lost an infant, and her journey in supporting women who had been harassed and in being attacked and discredited.

My turning point was when I came out of that retreat, and I think this is important for our conference, I decided to stop banging my head against the wall of abusers and to make progress in the good. That is a quote from *I Ching* where it says, if you fight evil directly, it sharpens its sword. If you make progress in the good, gradually that sword dulls. And so that was my decision. Stop. It was

terrible for me—the fight against this. And it didn't make any—they just kept doing what they were doing. And I suffered and Tara Mandala suffered.

And so I thought, I'm just going to do it like *I* think it should be done. And I'm going to create a place dedicated to the sacred feminine in the Tibetan tradition.

Not that we don't honour the masculine, but there needs to be a seat where this is brought forward and create a place like that.

Acharya Judith Simmer-Brown spoke about the challenges of being a Vajrayana student and understanding the kind of extremes we fall into, conceptually, when we are confronted with crisis.

On one extreme, we have our tendencies—all of us—towards spiritual by-passing. At Naropa we talk a great deal about spiritual by-passing, meaning the ways in which we use the teachings, on merely the absolute level, as a refuge from all of the messiness of our world, particularly our own personal issues, societal issues, community issues. And when we go to the teachings only on the absolute level, and rely on them in that way, we actually have missed an opportunity to engage the really gritty issues that we must relate to as bodhisattvas in order to be of benefit in the world.

You could say that the spiritual by-passing view says that the lama can do no wrong and always we should see the lama, every single thing about the lama, as the Buddha incarnate. (...) Doubts are part of the natural inquiry which are so important in our path as Dharma practitioners, as Vajrayana practitioners. And so, the violation of samaya comes when we doubt the fundamental goodness, the basic buddha nature of our teacher and our community. And so doubts, especially if these doubts that have not arrived at solid conclusions, are a healthy part of inquiry. (...)

Social justice by-passing is what is sweeping the country right now, where social justice concerns become a kind of credential and a kind of bragging point about 'I am more socially correct than you'. And this kind of woke-ism that has become an emblem of our sanghas has become a tremendously divisive point. There's a very important place for social justice concerns and the feminist in me is still alive and well, but when it becomes a substitute for the spiritual path, then I have tremendous concerns. And this is something that I definitely learned from my teacher.

So, the space in between, which is the realm of the feminine principle, is the realm in which we find this kind of groundless ground between spiritual by-passing and social justice by-passing. And this is a ground that my teacher described as the ground of the feminine principle.

The roundtable that followed was chaired by Khandro Rinpoche and Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel and addressed the following questions. The discussions were of course elaborate, and are only included here as a few quotes for reflection.

What is our understanding of agency in Vajrayana Buddhism?

We are the owners of our actions. So taking responsibility for our actions is agency. And, of course, that's informed by wisdom and compassion. So that's what it means to me. And, of course, now it's used in terms of women assuming agency, which in the past women didn't always—and in many parts of the world even today—did and do not have. *Karma Lekshe Tsomo*

We are living beings, so we have agency. However, society, our family, or even our Dharma centre has ideas about how much agency different people have. But, I think the bigger difficulty is that we often internalise the level of agency that is assigned to us. So people who are young, minorities, immigrants, and women often don't see the full extent of their agency or lack confidence in using it. Two things are working here—society, family, and so forth tell us what our role is and we internalise and accept that. So much of this is unspoken conditioning. It takes time and courage to unravel it and to feel confident to express ourselves, especially when our ideas and needs differ from that of the larger group.

The Buddha wants everyone to learn to think clearly, and clear thinking is the basis of useful agency. One of the first things my teacher said at my first Dharma course was, "You don't have to believe anything we say. You are intelligent people. Listen to the teachings, think about them. Put them into practice. If they make sense and help you, apply them to your lives. If they don't, leave them aside." I found that so empowering because right from the get go, we have to examine the teachings and develop our own wisdom. As our wisdom grows, so does our mental and emotional freedom. *Venerable Thubten Chödrön*

What can we learn from the great female practitioners?

Women have a tendency to doubt themselves and their own experience. And they are trained to do that; they're acculturated to not trust their experience, and to have their experience be defined by somebody else. (...)

When I went to find the biographies that are in *Women of Wisdom*, I was going in as a mother of three and I couldn't find stories that supported mothers as well as practitioners much. Machik Lapdrön left her children.

Many of them didn't have children. And so, I think, in some ways we also need to sort of create our own new stories, and seek these answers out for ourselves and then in a modern context.

However, if you're asking what inspired me about them, it's, I think, mainly diligence and courage in the face of adversity. I mean, if you think about Mandarava being thrown into that pit—and many, many cases—it seems like they all went through so much. *Lama Tsultrim Allione*

We could follow their example of becoming great yoginis; this means they're great practitioners, which means that they've spent a lot of time practising, and probably in retreat. And that hasn't come up that much in this symposium, this notion of the need to actually retreat. As long as Lama Tsultrim mentioned. She took one year off and, in that year, what she learned and the resolutions that she was able to decide upon, the decisiveness based on her core knowingness as a woman, then she could come out with confidence and go to her next direction. And I feel like it must be the case that so many of these great yoginis have done just that. And I noticed for myself. When I do take the time to step back and go into retreat, real progress is made in the correct direction.

Another point is, I think we women have a tremendous power of intuition. And you know, we are in fact the symbol of *prajna* and the truth is, most of the time in our core we really know what is correct. And if we just follow that, with a sense of confidence, then we can make really good decisions. And also to mention that, the path of Buddhadharma is the path of needing to make one's own decision about how to go forward. And so, if you look at the writings of so many teachers, it's really based upon investigation, which leads to doubting, but yet that is a way of understanding another position so that you can reach your determination and make a resolution and move forward. *Sangye Khandro*

Would we really water down the Dharma if we had other types of education in the Dharma communities about trauma, gender or culture?

In our sangha, we have experimented with something that is called a Deleg system. So, there's a Deleg system—a group of people who would be psychotherapists, therapists, psychologists. And if anyone seems to need counselling or help within the Sangha, we have that group of people there; then the spiritual teacher doesn't have to be involved because, no matter how accomplished a spiritual teacher is, maybe we don't have the vocabulary. We don't have the patience—number one. So, we say things like let go, get over it, purify your karma, circumambulate, do 100,000 prostrations or things like that.
Khandro Rinpoche

Can we bring balance to the discussions on sexuality?

One of the things that I think is very beautiful about Tibetan Buddhism is that there is a place for including sexual energy in practice as part of the path. Many schools of Buddhism consider that energy is completely off limits, in terms of spirituality, but the kind of holistic quality of including sexual energy as an aspect of the path is very important to acknowledge. Of course, the biggest danger comes from our human history, both in the West and in Tibet. Sexuality is almost always misused and misunderstood and used for power for personal gratification. We need to recognize that sexuality is exploited by personal ego and in social relationships between men and women.

So-called sexual yoga which has been part of Vajrayana is now hardly ever taught. My own teacher taught it to maybe one person, and it was not part of his teaching. I've learned about it from a few rare teachers for whom students did not experience it as an abusive or coercive situation. But there's a big difference between having sex with a teacher and mutually practicing sexual yoga, an actual practice. They say that with the proper motivation and communication it has been a positive experience for both partners and has been experienced as contributing to a personal path. I think it's important not to confuse sex and sexual yoga. *Judith Simmer-Brown*

As a beginner on the Vajrayana path, my question is, whether it is possible to be a Vajrayana practitioner and reach authentic accomplishment without relying on the consort practice. I don't understand why so much emphasis is given to sexual relationship, as if the Vajrayana path wasn't complete without it. Am I missing something? After all, didn't Buddha Shakyamuni attain enlightenment sitting under the Bodhi Tree? Or are we not aspiring for the same Enlightenment?

Some of the emphasis has been put on it because of misconceptions about it. Vajrayana is complete without relying on consort practice and it is something that is only meant for very few people, and I hope I expressed yesterday that the path of the third empowerment is a training that takes years of commitment. And it's definitely not something that many people can engage in or even want to. *Marcia Schmidt*

Can we keep our samayas to our teacher *and* be present to and acknowledge the suffering of someone facing difficulties in their student-teacher relationship?

You're never going to lose the view. It's not beyond you.

In highest Vajrayana, Dzogpachenpo, the view has to do with seeing, mostly across the board, the empty nature of self and phenomena, right? Or the non-existent aspect of phenomena. Yet you see the depth of that nature, as it is, the capacity of everything that can be known and experienced. And so that includes caring for people. But without fixation, without always introducing the ordinary fixated mind that attaches to things. *Sangye Khandro*

Khandro Rinpoche remarked: "Now, given the situations that we have had and faced, and when we are facing a very actual situation, answers that are very profound or very pithy and very true may not necessarily be understood, or the student may not have the capacity, especially for a student who doesn't even know what the concept of refuge is. So, the question seems to be: In today's situations, when we do face such an issue, what is the pragmatic way of approaching this? Can the sangha actually be trained in a particular way, or who else could be supportive?"

What I would say to that is that any kind of complaint about teachers' behaviour—to a sangha member or to yourself as a teacher, or teacher in training, whatever your position is in the organization—should be taken very seriously.

You should let that person know that you've heard them and that you believe them. And at least until it's really investigated. *Lama Tsultrim Allione*

We then had very important questions on the qualities and level of education that are important for a student to be ready to enter into the Vajrayana student-teacher relationship: What is the most essential thing they should embody or be aware of? And what would be a warning sign that a student is not ready to enter such a path? While we started to answer the question, we did not have time to go further into it.

To conclude the session, Khandro Rinpoche invited all participants to reflect on this question: 'How would you counsel a student who encounters sexual advances from a teacher? And to give a very direct, simple, pragmatic answer that would be helpful for a lot of the younger generation students.'

First of all, I would counsel a student that they should not do it because they feel pressured, and that they not feel that this is something that is implicit in samaya because it isn't. That would be a misunderstanding of samaya. And I would also alert them to the fact that there's a lot of loadedness in the power difference in relationship to a teacher. They should ponder very carefully, all of that. And if they are thinking "this is the only way that I can receive blessing or power or some kind of access" that's a terrible motivation. So mostly, I would not encourage this at all. It is possible that there could be a very rare situation, in a very considered environment, where a student might feel respected and listened to, and a sense of being in a mutually trusting relationship with a teacher, that it could be beneficial. But that would be very much up to the careful discernment of the student. Mostly, I would caution the student to think very carefully about the potential damage that can come from being in an intimate relationship where there is a very difficult, unequal, and tricky power dynamic. *Judith Simmer Brown*

I experienced this a number of times and I just simply said, 'No, thank you. I'm not interested. That's not what I'm in this relationship for.' *Sangye Khandro*

Again, all the points above are shared as a basis for personal reflection.

Striking main points from group discussions

Overall, there are some recurring themes that were raised in the group discussions, mainly on two themes: empowering and educating women, and addressing the difficulties in the student-teacher relationship between men and women.

The time was limited and it is fair to say that not all burning aspects of the topics were covered, so the following list may not be entirely satisfying:

- The importance of recognizing the blind spots in our communities, and that misconduct has taken place in our communities, and we mostly have not heard those asking for help.
- To become clearer about what kind of training and education is needed for women as well as men to engage in the Vajrayana.
- To not try to generalize anything for everyone. It would be too simplistic to think there's one solution to the problem.
- Sexual intercourse is a practice in Vajrayana but it is an advanced practice.
- Culturally, Tibetans and Bhutanese also have a relaxed approach to sexuality. In these contexts, it is not surprising that boundaries got blurred between a student-teacher relationship and personal matters.
- We need to educate the teachers on the topics we are discussing.
- We have a particular responsibility to call out misconduct because not all those who claim to be teachers are qualified, and without the vigilance of the sanghas, misconduct will multiply and weaken our tradition.
- We need to ensure that there is more education about these crucial topics of the student-teacher relationship for Vajrayana practitioners. This relationship is a practice.
- The one thing the teacher is responsible for is to see if the student is really at the point where they're mature enough to engage in this kind of relationship.
- We can extend our compassion to both teachers and students when it comes to the trappings of the teacher-student relationship. The teacher's job is not easy, nor is the student's.

- We're *always* encouraged to cultivate prajna, from the very beginning of the path to the Vajrayana. There's never a place where they say, 'In order to have devotion you have to abdicate your discernment.' So what are we abdicating? Our ego-clinging.
- To ensure that these teachings especially strengthen women's confidence in their own fundamental wakefulness and practice.
- While we aspire to have the personal strength of mind to repel unwanted sexual attention or interrogate our own desire for an intimate relationship with a teacher—many women who are hit on by teachers are young and inexperienced.
- There are many ways in which sanghas can prevent teachers and students from stepping over the boundaries of a true student-teacher relationship: codes of conduct, transparency, calling out misbehaviour, education on gender and harassment training. The importance of mentorship, sisterhood, sangha.
- The sangha has a responsibility. Buddhist sanghas have to do the work of looking at which structures enable abuse and which structures prevent consequences.
- We, as a group, have a strong sense of responsibility for preventing and facing abuse, clarifying Vajrayana, and treasuring the feminine in every way we can.

Conclusion of the symposium

Khandro Rinpoche brought the symposium to a conclusion, calling on each of us: "In conclusion, I think the power of—the power to shape the container or vessel within which the innate buddha nature resides is very much in our own hands, and it is up to each one of us to decide what shape we will give to that container that we identify as 'I'—whether man or as a woman."

And finally, she shared with everyone the profound dialogue between Shariputra and a celestial deity in the Vimalakirti Sutras' Seventh Chapter, where in the end, Shariputra understands, 'The form and shape of my female body does not exist, yet does not not exist.' And the goddess responded, 'All things are just like that—they do not exist, yet do not not exist. And that they do not exist, yet do not not exist, is exactly what the Buddha teaches.'

Next steps

We left with a sense the dialogue had started, and we had genuinely been, in Dominique Side's words, "open and non-judgmental, really just trying to understand things better".

A first next step is for each symposium participant to bring back to their sangha and to their teachers the questions for reflection from the symposium, and in particular:

- What can we do to prevent difficulties that arise in the relationship that might arise between the student and their teacher?
- And when difficulties arise, how can we face them?

We have started talking about the role of the teacher, the role of the student and the need for modern education. Could we examine more fully what the role of the teacher is? And what is the role of the student? What is the role of the sangha in preventing and facing difficulties? And what kind of education is needed in Dharma communities to prevent and face these difficulties?

Hopefully this report of the Symposium will prompt each of us to engage in safe dialogues with sangha friends and deepen our study and practice.

All the materials of the symposium are now available to the women teachers who took part in the symposium, and we hope that they can become a support to workshops and continued dialogues, holding the space for each of us to explore what it means to treasure the feminine in Vajrayana Buddhism.

The conversation has started and our communities are more and more willing to face their blindspots. From such openness, there is no saying what will happen next.

Further reading

This [reading list here](#) was gathered on the occasion of the symposium as a support for our study and practice.

With gratitude to everyone who contributed to making both the Symposium and the report possible.

This summary was endorsed by the contributors and made available on 27 March 2022.

May it be of benefit.