

Meditation on White Tara

by Lama Choedak Rinpoche

Preface

White Tara According to the precious teachings of the Buddha all sufferings and problems have their origin in the three afflictions, i.e. desire, hatred and ignorance. Buddhadharma is an effective medicine to cure all sufferings that are caused by these destructive emotions. In essence, Buddha taught that self-discipline, meditation and wisdom will remedy the three afflictions. The three main Buddhist traditions promote the practices of renunciation, altruism and emptiness as the three fundamental principles of the teachings. In order to remedy desire, the teaching of the individual liberation vehicle (Theravada Buddhism) places great emphasis on the practice of renunciation, or the rejection of sensory objects by adopting self-restraint, discipline and simplicity.

Mahayana Buddhism, on the other hand, emphasises altruism: to embrace the world by cultivating bodhicitta to attain enlightenment for the benefit others. With loving kindness and compassion as the instigator of action, hatred will be overcome. While both renunciation and altruism are essential, without the wisdom of realising no-self, they may bring a sense of hopelessness and cause compassion fatigue and discouragement in practitioners, at some point along the path. Therefore, it is important to have a good comprehension of the philosophical analysis of emptiness, as explained in the Buddhist texts.

However, the realisation of selflessness will take a long time if one lacks merit. The third stream, Vajrayana Buddhist practice, is based on the other two forms of Buddhism and offers a multitude of additional techniques to help one accumulate merit and transcendental wisdom and, through deity yoga meditation, accelerates one's understanding of emptiness. These practices enable students to transcend the notion of 'self' and 'other' and the confusion caused by dualistic views.

Vajrayana Buddhist practices include the option to meditate on many different enlightened forms (deities) in accordance with systems of Tantra. Enlightened beings have two forms: wisdom aspect (dharmakaya) and form aspect (rupakaya). Due to their infinite compassion, and while remaining in the state of wisdom, enlightened beings appear in a form body (rupakaya) to help beings. Vajrayana is the skilful manifestation of ultimate altruism. The clarity of the appearance of the deity is relative altruism and the emptiness of the form of the deity is ultimate altruism.

The deity may be seen as a Buddha; a guru; a friend; or as a mere reflection of the mind. Most people with devout minds will perceive the deity as a form of an enlightened being who, when prayed to, can help to allay their fears and other problems. This model will suit people who seek a saviour from outside. Some people with strong guru devotion may be able to perceive their spiritual mentor as the protector and guide who can help them dissolve their ego. This model will suit people who worship people who they see as special or wise. Certain practitioners with matured understanding may perceive the deity as a friend who can assist with many of their mundane and spiritual needs. Certain high level practitioners may see all perception (including that of the deity) as a mere projection of their mind. A rare few may perceive the deity as none other than the unity of the clarity and emptiness of the mind. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the practice of deity yoga takes the centre stage to overcome ego

grasping and facilitate one of these realisations to occur in one's mind, according to the mental capacity of the student.

Until people possess the good karmic disposition to embrace Vajrayana Buddhism and understand its approach to realise no self through deity yoga, people will continue to either fight or flee from their objects of love and aversion. They fail to see their mind and its true nature. They see people or things, out there, existing from their own side. Whether they love or hate something dictates whether they cannot get enough of it, or do not want anything to do with it. When such dualistic minds swing back and forth it is very obvious that the mind is not at peace with itself. In Vajrayana, the rejection of such dualistic impure perception is true renunciation. Otherwise, however strong one's renunciation is from worldly pleasure, and even if one is able to live a simpler life, one quickly becomes attached to one's own version of purity and develops aversion to others, who one thinks are not pure. In Vajrayana, developing loving kindness and compassion to those who do not know this is true bodhicitta.

About Tara

Tara is a female enlightened one in the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist pantheon and a meditation practice which offers students the opportunity to expand and clarify their understanding of their own minds and the nature of life itself. She is the manifestation of bodhicitta and the activities of all the Buddhas. Tara is a Sanskrit word which means 'she who rescues'. Tara is said to have appeared from the tears of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who cried out of loving kindness and compassion towards all sentient beings who are stuck in their own mental conditioning. As a mother to all children sentient beings, she is inspired to rescue us all from fearful situations in life, and the fear of death. In South East Buddhist countries she is widely known as Kuan Yin. Tibetan Buddhists in the Himalaya region know her as Tara. Tara and Kuan Yin have the same qualities. There are twenty one forms of Tara. Each form has a special quality to allay particular fears.

Those seeking refuge in the Triple Gem are afraid of the incessant unsatisfactory nature of worldly existence. Fear is one of the three main causes of taking refuge in the Triple Gem. Some take refuge in the Triple Gem due to fear of this life, as well as untimely death. Even faith in the qualities of the Triple Gem and compassion towards sentient beings are mainly aroused by fear of suffering in this life and of falling into a lower rebirth, due to afflictions such as anger. Our fear of physical danger inspired the invention of many things, from simple dwellings to sophisticated insurance policies. The majority of people believe in a form of spiritual practice out of fear of the darkness of evil and faith in the light of wisdom. Protection from fear and aspirations for security are the main purpose of life's quest, whether it is choosing to eat organic food or doing meditation.

There are lofty teachings that say that people who are attached to the well-being of this life are not dharma practitioners. But realistically speaking, any dharma practitioner who has a fortunate life must recognise it as very precious. One can debate if its preciousness is only restricted to future lives, but, however precious this life is, it could not be of much use, even to improve the next life, if it does not last long. There will be very few who wish to live a short life for the sake of future lives. There will be even fewer who wish to live a short life for the sake of this one.

Fear of natural disasters such as fire, flood and man-made problems are not new to this world. Buddhists may not believe in a creator god, but they believe in the effects of positive deeds,

such as praying to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. There are prayers to protect one from external causes of danger, even in early Buddhist literature. The prayers are made in front of shrines and statues of Buddhas. Prayers are not a passive request to the divine by inactive humans. Prayers are devotees' own way of reminding themselves how they can plan and pay attention to positive things. Offerings of flowers and lamps are carefully arranged in front of statues before making prayers for the sick, the dying or the dead. Prayer is an effective remedy to sadness and angry thoughts and helps to redirect the mind towards positive things one can do instead. In Buddhism, prayers are not answered by gods or divinities; prayers are verbal good karma which bring about meritorious effects themselves.

Early Buddhist literature recommends the recollection of Buddha amidst five other recollections. Honouring the three supports of the body, speech and mind of the Buddha is also prescribed as an object of recollection for one who has taken refuge in the Triple Gem. Reflecting on holy objects leaves a very positive impression on the mind of those who believe in the Buddhas and bodhisattvas or positive qualities of enlightened beings. The statues of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are symbols to help people remember the qualities of the Buddha. Faith and reason are not opposites if they are used to redirect one's unused energy in a positive way.

The story of Tara is associated with infinite loving kindness and compassion towards all sentient beings. The enlightened one here is seen in the image of a kind and wise mother. She is a mother to all sentient beings. Considering all sentient beings as one's mother is fundamental to the Mahayana Buddhist teachings to which Vajrayana Buddhism belongs. In this tradition, there is no way to exclude the welfare of any sentient being. The story of Tara is inspiring in the sense that she made a vow to appear in female form in order to inspire many who may otherwise be discouraged by the male dominated Buddhist religion. She made a commitment to allay all fears, including that of being discriminated against. It is also evident that the worship of Tara spread to Sri Lanka, as statues of Tara dating back to the 2nd century BC have been excavated by archeologists there.

If Avalokiteshvara is famous as the patron deity of Tibet, it is also true that Tara is the mother of all the Tibetan people. The myth of the matrimonial relationship of the monkey Avalokiteshvara or the ogress Tara that caused the spread of the Tibetan race is not only driven by the desire of the ogress but also by the kindness and compassion of the monkey. Even the desire of the ogress became a useful object for the monkey's compassion, so much so that the loss of his chastity helped to produce the Tibetan race. If the six syllable mantra of Avalokiteshvara is on the lips of all Tibetans, it is also true that most of them know praises to Tara by heart. Most Tibetans recite the praises to Tara every day, at dusk or dawn.

When Tibetan devotees invited the highly revered Atisha, a Bangladeshi monk to Tibet, he was very apprehensive about going to Tibet. Atisha would never have gone to Tibet in 1042, and made his vast contribution to the spread of Buddhism, had Tara not persuaded him to do so. As Tara is regarded as the manifestation of Buddha activities in general, and particularly, as a saviour from the eight and the sixteen fears, the worship of Tara spread in Tibet like no other deities or dharma protectors.

Through Atisha, Bari Lotsawa, Suryagupta, Kashmiri Pandita Shakyashri and Nyen Lotsawa Drama Drak, the Tara practice spread into Tibet from the very early days. Tara was also one of the four main deities of the early Kadampa masters and, consequently, Tara practice was widely promoted in Tibet by Gelong-ma Palmo and Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltsen, who authored

some of the earliest rituals and prayers. The second Dalai Lama was also a devotee of Tara and wrote a number of related liturgies.

Because of the importance of this life, and a reasonable lifespan for the benefit of all beings that one might help, there is a wide range of long life practices in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. In Mahayana Buddhism they chant and recite long life dharanis and sutras, whereas, in Vajrayana Buddhism there is the tradition of doing life prolonging deity yoga meditation practices based on lineage systems. The trilogy of long life deities of Amitayus, White Tara and Ushnishavijaya is a very famous living tradition kept all these years. Of these, the seven eyed goddess of longevity, White Tara, is the most famous of all. All these traditions are traceable to their Indian parent lineages attributed to various Indian Mahasiddhas.

However many people may fear the danger of attachment to this life, no one seeks to shorten its duration. Most are keen to lengthen its duration at all costs. Long life is considered one of the seven qualities of a higher rebirth. What can one do if one does not live long enough? Faced with signs of impending death, and devastated by the loss of his wife and children, Gampopa did a six month White Tara retreat. As a result of this retreat he extended his life to eighty five years and became instrumental and a founding father of the glorious Kagyu lineage. He was the teacher to the 1st Karmapa, who is considered the manifestation of enlightened activities of all the Buddhas.

In Tibetan Buddhism, we have one insurance policy: it is 'the long life practice of White Tara Sadhana'. Every year Tibetans gather in Dharamsala to offer White Tara Long Life prayers to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who has agreed to live 113 years to serve others. He has also threatened to live fewer if his followers do not obey his wishes. My kind old mother, Choekyi Tsomo always recited praises to Tara every morning and evening. She is ninety five years old and still going strong. I have also witnessed my own precious teacher, Vajradhara Kyabje Chogye Trichen Rinpoche and his devoted commitment to doing White Tara meditation every morning before breakfast. As a result he lived eighty seven years and benefitted countless beings through his long life. Rinpoche never did any physical exercise, he observed no strict dietary requirements, took no vitamins or any food supplements, never drank even a glass of red wine, nor did any of the things that many people think are the secrets to living a long and healthy life. Had he not lived this many years he could not have become the teacher of HH the Dalai Lama, HH Sakya Trizin and many others. Had he died in his forties, he would be unknown and many of us would never have met him. But now he is the immortal Guru of all Gurus.

Many talented people die young because they have failed to do long life practices. If students knew and performed long life pujas for their teachers, a number of Tibetan teachers may have lived longer. When one asks why Chogyam Trungpa and Lama Yeshe died so young, you can see why, (although some will point to another cause of their short life). Their students were mainly academics and sceptics who took on Buddhism, as some did in the sixties, and they failed to do long life prayers for their teachers. But well established traditions do not ignore long life practices, they embrace and maintain them.

In 1972 Kyabje Chogye Trichen Rinpoche received an empowerment from Her Eminence Jetsun Kusho-la in Rajpur. This was arranged secretly for reasons I did not know at that time and occurred just before she immigrated to Canada. In 1982, the late Dezhung Tulku Rinpoche travelled to South East Asia and gave White Tara empowerment among other empowerments. Cyrus and Maruta Stearns translated Sachen Kunga Lodro's sadhana. In 1987, I received the

uncommon White Tara empowerment from Kyabje Chogye Trichen Rinpoche at Jamchen Lhakhang during one of the pilgrimages I led. At that time Rinpoche said: 'You should promote this practice in Australia'. In 1988, His Holiness Sakya Trizin bestowed another form of White Tara empowerment at the conclusion of Lamdre at Vajradhara Gumpa. I also received the uncommon White Tara empowerment when His Holiness gave the Collection of Sadhanas at Tharlam monastery in 1993. Then when Her Eminence Jetsun Kusho-la visited Australia in 1989, she gave White Tara empowerment in Canberra at the request of Sakya Losal Choe Dzong. As the uncommon White Tara practice has been a highly treasured practice for many centuries, I promised her that we will organise an annual White Tara retreat and conduct monthly practice sessions. Her Eminence noted that it was unusual to give the uncommon White Tara empowerment so openly. Consequently, we at Sakya Losal Choe Dzong in Canberra have maintained the tradition of hosting an annual White Tara retreat ever since it was first given in Australia. To facilitate this I thoroughly read and studied all the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature on the White Tara practice. Thus White Tara became one of the first practices that was introduced and taught extensively in Australia. It is very pleasing that we have been able to maintain annual White Tara meditation retreats for all these years.

I have been fortunate to lead all of these annual White Tara retreats every January long weekend, to provide an auspicious beginning for the year. Since then I have also promoted this practice to other Centres. In 1999, Jetsun Kusho-la returned to Australia to preside over the 10th annual retreat, which was held at Birrigai Recreation Facility near Canberra. The first seventeen annual retreats were hosted by Sakya Losal Choe Dzong in Canberra and they were only relocated to SIBA in 2007.

The health and vitality of Sakya Losal Choe Dzong's dharma activities over the years have been unimaginably blessed to reach great heights. It is estimated that over 3,500 people have taken refuge in the Triple Gem through the Centre. Sakya Losal Choe Dzong has hosted visits from all Sakya lineage masters in Australia and many hundreds of people have been introduced to the sacred Dharma. My own health, direction, energy and motivation also could not have been as strong had we not maintained the White Tara practice.

We had hopes to have either Her Eminence Jetsun Kusho-la or His Eminence Ratna Vajra Rinpoche preside over this 25th annual retreat but it was not meant to be. They were both unavailable due to their busy schedules. In failing to get either of them to lead this retreat, Jaki-la said to me, 'What is the fuss? It is appropriate that you lead the 25th annual retreat as you have consistently led all of the previous ones'. I had to come to agree with this and decided to cease trying to invite someone from overseas. In any case, I have planned to have something ready to mark this milestone. So, in preparation for this retreat Phil Cooper and Ven. Jampal-la worked on the publication of the new edition of the White Tara Sadhana in traditional pecha form.

This commentary was prepared from Ven. Jampal-la's extensive notes taken during teachings I gave over several retreats. Mark compiled the notes and, after he sent me the manuscript, I worked on refining it for two months. As it reached its final stages, Jaki-la helped with the proof reading and editing for many days. So, here this book is another manifestation of Tara's energy flowing through all of our combined joyous effort. I thank them all for their valuable help. Most of the teachings on the main section are based on the commentary by Ngor Ponlop Ngawang Lekdrup (1811). As a nephew of Gonchen Khenpo Samten Lodro, he rose to great prominence to become the Ngorpa teacher of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. I have also studied

both Vagindrakirti's 'How to Realise the Cheating of Death' and Kongtrul Lodro Thaye's commentary on this text. There are many who give initiations, but the paucity of books on the practice is a matter of concern. At least this is a small offering for all who recognise the role of mother Tara.

As I was working on this book, I heard the news of many around me who were sick or dying. My beloved sister in-law, Pasang, also passed away on 3 January 2014 after a long illness. I dedicate this effort to repay her kindness so that her consciousness is guided to find a good rebirth in the higher realms and attain Buddhahood.

This extract is from the preface to Lama Choedak Rinpoche's new book "Meditation on White Tara".