

On Kālacakra Sādhana and Social Responsibility

Most of us want to help. Some do this by involvement in the peace movement, or in the environmentalist movement, or in the movement to end world hunger. We were probably attracted to Buddhism because of its Bodhisattva ideal, the ideal of putting the welfare of others ahead of our own. Human beings everywhere have this ideal, this noble aspiration, in some form. It may manifest as a sense of social responsibility. In Christian countries we find church groups in every town involved in community service. In Buddhist countries such as Tibet, the Lamas begin their morning meditations with the wish and resolve to benefit others.

In the Kālacakra meditation, or *sādhana*, like virtually all Buddhist *sādhana*s, one of the first things you do is generate *bodhicitta*. You know that the Buddha, the enlightened one, has been able to effectively help millions of living beings. You wish to do this, too. So you generate a resolve to become enlightened like the Buddha, for the sole purpose of effectively benefiting others. The state of mind so generated, in which the welfare of others is more important than your own, sets the tone for all that will follow in the meditation.

Since you see the great need in the world around you, you know you must do something effective quickly. That is why you have chosen the path of tantra, the fast path. The *Kālacakra Tantra*, like other Buddhist tantras, teaches a meditation technique where you visualize yourself as a particular form of a Buddha. You visualize yourself as having all the qualities of this Buddha. It is a technique of transformation. What distinguishes Kālacakra from other Buddhist tantras is that you not only transform yourself during the meditations, you also help transform the world.

I wrote the small book, *Kālacakra Sādhana and Social Responsibility*, to call attention to this latter aspect. Many sincere workers for world good today have never paid attention to anything as esoteric-sounding as Kālacakra. The idea of meditating on strange-looking deities seems altogether too impractical in face of pressing world needs in the here and now. Yet I have become convinced that there is nothing more effective that could be done for the world than the practice of the Kālacakra *sādhana*. I think that when the Dalai Lama uses the phrase, “Kālacakra for world peace,” it is more than just a slogan. The Buddhist tradition has had 2,500 years to develop effective means, and Tibetans like the Dalai Lama regard Kālacakra as the pinnacle of these.

My book opens with an account of Vedic recitation. That’s right, Vedic recitation, as found in Hindu tradition, not in Buddhist tradition. In India, Vedic recitation has been regarded for thousands of years as what upholds the cosmic order. The sounds comprising the Vedic recitation are thought to order the cosmos and keep it in harmony. The rationale of this is much the same as what modern physics shows us, when sand on a drumhead makes different patterns as different musical notes are sounded. In any case, this idea was universal in ancient Brahmanical India, and, as we may deduce from the *Vimala-prabhā* Kālacakra commentary, in the hidden kingdom of Śambhala.

The *Vimala-prabhā* describes Śambhala as having 35 million Brahma-Rishis, or Vedic sages. The account from this commentary forms the second chapter of my book. At the time of the Buddha, the king of Śambhala is said to have traveled to India to request from him the Kālacakra teachings. The king returned to Śambhala with these teachings. He wished to have the Vedic sages of his kingdom adopt them. How this occurred makes an interesting story. In the end, the sages did adopt the Kālacakra teachings, and Kālacakra became the state religion of Śambhala. There they were preserved for many centuries, until an Indian yogi brought them to India about a thousand years ago. From India they were transferred to Tibet, being translated

from Sanskrit into Tibetan, where they have been preserved until our time.

A brief summary of these extraordinary teachings is found in the third chapter of my book. These teachings are secret, in the sense that one is not allowed to discuss their details with those who have not received the Kālacakra initiation. Thus what is in my book is only general statements, but enough to see what the practice entails. The idea was also to somewhat contextualize these teachings, since they are so foreign to us in the West. The context of the Vedic precedents, and the adoption of the Kālacakra teachings by the sages of Śambhala, I think illustrate the primary concern of those involved in these teachings, namely, the welfare of the world.

The idea of secrecy is something we are not accustomed to, especially in our modern world where everything is open. But with Kālacakra, like other Buddhist tantras, it is of very real importance. To use the analogy given by Lama Govinda in his book, *The Way of the White Clouds*, Tibetans regard the Buddhist tantric teachings much like we in the West regard nuclear reactors. For the safety of everyone, knowledge of and access to them must be carefully restricted. To continue the analogy, receiving a tantric initiation is required for access to the secret tantric teachings, just as receiving security clearance is required for access to the secret specifications of nuclear reactions. An experience of mine may serve to show just how seriously this is taken in Tibetan tradition.

I had first heard of Kālacakra around Christmas of 1974, from Nicholas Roerich's book, *Shambhala*. His references to the Kālacakra teachings were very inspiring. But of course, almost nothing was available on them at that time in Western languages. In 1977 I began to study Sanskrit, and in early 1979 in Dharamsala, Tibetan. I was delighted to find that the *Kālacakra Tantra* had earlier been published in the original Sanskrit, along with its Tibetan and Mongolian translations. About 1980 I began reading the Sanskrit *Kālacakra Tantra*, but it was almost incomprehensible. By then the Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions had microfilmed a

number of Sanskrit manuscripts in Nepal, including the great Kālacakra commentary entitled *Vimala-prabhā*, “Immaculate Light.” I was able to obtain a microfilm of this manuscript from them. It was a huge help, as were the Tibetan translations; but there were still problems, questions of what the text means.

By the fall of 1980, when I had hardly gotten 20 verses into the *Kālacakra Tantra*, I took one of these questions to a Tibetan Geshe who was giving public teachings in the U.S.A. He did not answer the question. He said emphatically that I must not attempt to read this book, or even open it, without first receiving the Kālacakra initiation. He said it would be very dangerous to do so. I followed his advice. I put the texts away, until in 1981 I received the Kālacakra initiation from the Dalai Lama in Madison, Wisconsin, the first time he gave it in the West. In this way it was strongly impressed upon me that the Kālacakra initiation gives the necessary permission to study and practice the Kālacakra teachings, and it provides protection for the student and practitioner of these teachings.

Tantric initiations, in keeping with the idea of secrecy, have traditionally always been limited to a few selected pupils. Kālacakra is an exception to this, because many people take the Kālacakra initiation as a blessing rather than as a prerequisite to its study and practice. Many Tibetans believe that the contact with these teachings provided by the Kālacakra initiation will sow the seeds for them to be reborn in Śambhala in the future. So there is a tradition in Tibet of giving large public Kālacakra initiations. For the comparatively few attendees who will actually take up the study and practice of Kālacakra, the initiation also means a commitment. You commit to at least a minimum daily practice from that time on, for the rest of your life.

When the Dalai Lama gave the Kālacakra initiation in the U.S.A. in 1981, there were no materials available in English from which to do any such practice. So he provided a six-session guru-yoga Kālacakra practice in a book that everyone there received. After he gave the Kālacakra initiation in Switzerland in 1985, translations of other Kālacakra *sādhanas* were also

made available to those who requested them, through the kind efforts of Andy Wistreich. This was all truly wonderful, making possible the practice of Kālacakra by those in the West. Yet for me, it made a new problem, that obliged me to mentally put the initiation I had received in 1981 on hold, at least in so far as the daily practice commitment was concerned.

What defines a tantra, and thus distinguishes it from a text that need not be kept secret, is the presence in it of mantras. Mantras are composed of Sanskrit syllables. The recitation of mantras forms an integral part of all tantric *sādhana* practice. Just as Tibetan Buddhist tradition regards initiation as absolutely indispensable for the practice of tantra, so Indian Brahmanical tradition regards exactitude as absolutely indispensable for the recitation of mantras. They went to what we would regard as great extremes to insure exactitude in the transmission of their mantras, both of the syllables these are composed of, and of their correct pronunciation. I took this tradition just as seriously as I did the Geshe's warning about the necessity of first receiving the initiation. So I could not practice the *sādhana* until I had ascertained the correct form and pronunciation of its Sanskrit mantras, which were found in varying forms in the Tibetan *sādhanas*.

Much like we in the West look up to the Tibetans as the source of the precious Buddhist teachings, so the Tibetans have always looked up to the Indians as the source of these precious teachings. The Tibetan Buddhist canon consists of Tibetan translations of the original Sanskrit Buddhist texts from India. The Tibetans' love for these must have rubbed off on me. I still remember the thrill when on my first trip to India in 1978 I found in a bookstore a published reproduction of an ancient Sanskrit manuscript of the *Kālacakra Tantra*. By the time my problem about doing the Kālacakra practice arose in the early 1980s, the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project was well underway, filming many thousands of Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts in Nepal. A friend who was doing a thesis on the first chapter of the Kālacakra texts had gone to Nepal for part of his research. With his help, I was able to obtain in the mid-1980s microfilms of several more Kālacakra manuscripts, including

a Sanskrit full-length Kālacakra *sādhana* extracted from the *Vimala-prabhā*. These allowed me to eventually ascertain the correct form of all the mantras.

Thus I was finally able to begin my daily practice commitment in 1987, six years after I had received the Kālacakra initiation. Of course, this highly unusual situation was peculiar to my own path. No such problem exists for other Kālacakra practitioners. This is because the great majority of Tibetan Lamas find that the blessings of the transmission lineage override any concerns about the form or pronunciation of the mantras. Indeed, this has proven fully adequate for many centuries. But I love Sanskrit. Even after all these years, the Sanskrit texts have never lost their appeal for me. To me, the most impressive work being done anywhere on the planet is the work of the Rare Buddhist Texts Research Project of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath.

Here at this institute, in a reversal of the transmission of the Buddhist canon to Tibet a millennium ago, Sanskrit pandits of India are working in collaboration with learned Tibetans to again make the Buddhist canon available in its original Sanskrit. They are utilizing the long lost Sanskrit manuscripts that have now been microfilmed, and are editing these with the help of their Tibetan translations. Many important volumes have already been published, including the great *Vimala-prabhā* Kālacakra commentary. I have utilized this text to prepare an appendix to my book, giving the deities of the Kālacakra mind mandala. All Kālacakra *sādhanas*, whether written by Indians or Tibetans, must necessarily be based on this primary text. Occasional differences in these *sādhanas* occur, and this appendix is meant to provide what is now available from the original Sanskrit source.

The founder and former longtime Director of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies is Samdhong Rinpoche, currently Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. Although I knew that Tibetans studying there had to learn Sanskrit pronunciation, it was still a pleasant surprise to me to hear Samdhong Rinpoche pronounce the Kālacakra heart mantra in the Sanskrit fashion. He did this during a break in

our 1997 discussions on his ideas of how to have a nonviolent society. When he pronounced the nasal after the last syllable, as is required in Sanskrit, rather than after the first syllable, as is the current practice among Tibetan Lamas, I expressed my surprise. He replied that of course he followed the Sanskrit pronunciation. Why wouldn't he when the original is now available? Well, that certainly sums it up for me.

But however we recite our mantras, the fact that we in the West have them at all is absolutely unprecedented in human history. The Kālacakra *sādhana* is today available to all who have received the Kālacakra initiation. Thanks to many kind Tibetan Lamas, this is now a large number of people throughout the world. We thus have the means to directly participate in furthering the well-being of our planet. Never before has there been such an extraordinary opportunity.

[The foregoing article was written by David Reigle, and published in abridged form in French translation as “Méditation de Kalachakra & responsabilité sociale,” in a special issue of *Bouddhisme Actualites*, 2003, p. 40. The full article in English was then made available on the International Kalachakra Network website, at: http://kalachakranet.org/text_david_reigle_kalacakra_sadhana_social.html. This online edition is published by Eastern Tradition Research Institute, copyright 2006. The book referred to is: *Kālacakra Sādhana and Social Responsibility*, by David Reigle, Santa Fe: Spirit of the Sun Publications, 1996.]