

Introduction to Buddhist Tantra

What is Tantra?

The highest of all possible human goals is the attainment of complete enlightenment, an ultimate state of peace in which all obstacles obscuring the mind have been removed and all good qualities such as wisdom, compassion, and skillful means have been fully developed.

However, we cannot reach this ultimate goal merely by waiting for it; we need to use the appropriate methods to take us there.

What are the methods for attaining the peace of full enlightenment? They are the paths of Sutra and Secret Mantra; there is no third method. Of these two, the techniques revealed in Secret Mantra are superior to those revealed in the Sutras.

Not only is Secret Mantra the supreme path to full enlightenment, it is also extremely rare. As [Je Tsongkhapa](#) said, the teachings of Secret Mantra are even rarer than the Buddhas because, although a thousand founding Buddhas will appear during this Fortunate Eon, only the fourth ([Buddha Shakyamuni](#)), the eleventh, and the last will teach the paths of Secret Mantra.

At the moment, we have a great opportunity to practice these rare and beneficial teachings, so it is important that we develop a strong intention to practice them purely.

If the Mahayana teachings were to vanish from this world, we would have no opportunity to become a Buddha. Therefore, while we still have access to these precious teachings, we should apply ourselves to them assiduously and try to gain some experience of them.

The etymology of Secret Mantra is as follows. 'Secret' indicates that these methods should be practiced discreetly. If we make a display of

our practices, we will attract many hindrances and negative forces. This would be like someone talking openly and carelessly about a precious jewel they possessed and, as a result, attracting the attention of thieves.

'Mantra' means 'protection for the mind'. The function of Secret Mantra is to enable us to progress swiftly through the stages of the spiritual path by protecting our mind against ordinary appearances and ordinary conceptions.

Why Practice Tantra?

It is often said that the path of Tantra is superior to the path of Sutra, but to understand why this is so we need to engage in a precise study of both Sutra and Tantra; otherwise our statements about the superiority of Tantra will be mere words.

Moreover, if we do not study both Sutra and Tantra well, we shall find it difficult to understand how to practice the union of Sutra and Tantra, and then there will be a great danger of our either rejecting the practice of Tantra or ignoring the practice of Sutra.

The teachings of Tantra, or Secret Mantra as it is sometimes called, are the rarest and most precious of Buddha's teachings. It is only by following the path of Secret Mantra that we can attain enlightenment, or Buddhahood.

Why can we not attain full enlightenment just by practicing the paths of Sutra? There are two main reasons. First, to attain Buddhahood we need to accomplish both the Truth Body and the Form Body of a Buddha.

Although Sutra teachings present a general explanation of how these two bodies are accomplished in dependence upon the stages of the path of wisdom and method, they do not give precise explanations of the actual direct, substantial causes of these two bodies. The direct,

substantial cause of the Truth Body is meaning clear light, and the direct, substantial cause of the Form Body is the illusory body. These are explained only in Secret Mantra.

The second reason why Sutra paths cannot lead us to full enlightenment is that Sutra teachings do not present methods for overcoming the very subtle obstructions to omniscience – the subtle dualistic appearances associated with the minds of white appearance, red increase, and black near-attainment.

These three minds become manifest when our inner winds dissolve within the central channel during sleep, during the death process, or during completion stage meditation.

Although these minds are subtle minds they are nevertheless contaminated minds because their objects – the appearance of space pervaded by white light, the appearance of space pervaded by red light, and the appearance of space pervaded by darkness – appear as inherently existent.

These appearances of inherent existence are subtle dualistic appearances, and very subtle obstructions to omniscience. Because Sutra teachings do not explain how to recognize the subtle minds of white appearance, red increase, and black near-attainment, Sutra Bodhisattvas are unable even to recognize the subtle dualistic appearances associated with them, let alone abandon them.

In general, dualistic appearance is the appearance to a mind of both its object and inherent existence. All the minds of living beings, with the exception of the exalted awareness of meditative equipoise of Superior beings, have this appearance.

A direct realization of emptiness with a gross mind does not have the power to overcome the subtle dualistic appearances associated with the minds of white appearance, red increase, and black near-attainment.

The only way to abandon these subtle dualistic appearances is to realize emptiness directly with a very subtle mind of clear light. Since the methods for manifesting and using the very subtle mind of clear light are explained only in Secret Mantra, anyone who wishes to attain Buddhahood definitely needs to enter this path.

Authentic Tantra

Je Tsongkhapa explained that an authentic Secret Mantra practice must possess four attributes, known as the 'four complete purities'. These are:

- Complete purity of place
- Complete purity of body
- Complete purity of enjoyments
- Complete purity of deeds

The practice of these four complete purities was not revealed in the Sutra teachings, but is to be found only in Secret Mantra.

Secret Mantra is distinguished from Sutra by the practice of bringing the future result into the present path. For example, even though we have not yet attained enlightenment, when we practise Secret Mantra we try to prevent ordinary appearances and ordinary conceptions of our environment and instead visualize our surroundings as the mandala of a Deity.

In the same way, we prevent ordinary appearance of our body, our enjoyments, and our deeds, and, in their place, generate ourself as a Deity, visualize our enjoyments as those of a Buddha, and practise performing enlightened deeds.

By doing such practices, we can attain the resultant state of Buddhahood very rapidly.

These four practices are essential for both the generation stage and completion stage of Secret Mantra.

Levels of Tantra

Tantra, or Secret Mantra, has four levels:

Action Tantra

Performance Tantra

Yoga Tantra

Highest Yoga Tantra

Action Tantra principally emphasizes external actions, Performance Tantra places equal emphasis on both external and internal actions, Yoga Tantra principally emphasizes internal actions, and Highest Yoga Tantra is the supreme class of Tantra.

All four levels of Secret Mantra transform great bliss into the spiritual path, but the methods of transformation differ according to the level being practised.

In Action Tantra, the meditator generates bliss by looking at a visualized goddess, and then transforms that bliss into the path. In Performance Tantra, the meditator generates bliss by exchanging smiles with the goddess, and in Yoga Tantra, by holding hands with her and so forth.

In Highest Yoga Tantra, the meditator generates bliss by imagining sexual embrace with a consort and, at advanced stages, by engaging in actual embrace; and then transforms that bliss into the spiritual path. It should be noted, however, that it is very difficult to use great bliss as a method for attaining enlightenment, and if we are able to do so we have indeed attained a formidable accomplishment.

As the great Mahasiddha Saraha said, 'Everyone is excited by copulation, but very few can transform that bliss into the spiritual path'.

Attachment & Tantra

Generally, Buddhism teaches that attachment is a delusion that is to be avoided, and eventually abandoned, but in Secret Mantra there is a method for transforming attachment into the path.

However, to practice this method we must be very skillful. In this practice, we use attachment to generate great bliss and then use that mind of great bliss to meditate on emptiness. Only if we can do this is it a transformation of attachment.

Attachment itself cannot be used directly as a path because it is a delusion, and even in Secret Mantra it is finally to be abandoned. In authentic Secret Mantra practice, the bliss generated from attachment meditates on emptiness and thereby overcomes all the delusions, including attachment itself.

This is similar to the way in which the fire produced from rubbing two pieces of wood together eventually consumes the wood from which it arose.

For those who are unskillful, or whose minds are untrained, such practices of transformation are impossible. For this reason, the Yogis and great meditators of the past have said that to attain the realizations of Secret Mantra, one's mind should first be controlled by training in the Sutra stages of the path. Without building this firm foundation, there is absolutely no way to attain a pure experience of Secret Mantra.

It is very important, therefore, that both the Spiritual Guide and the disciple have controlled minds and an impeccable motivation. Even though we may call ourself a Buddhist and take refuge in the Three

Jewels every day, these alone are insufficient qualifications for the practice of Secret Mantra.

It should be noted that the spontaneous great bliss of the completion stage of Secret Mantra is not the same as ordinary pleasure experienced at the height of sexual embrace.

Spontaneous great bliss is experienced only when, through the force of meditation, we cause the winds to enter, abide, and dissolve within the central channel and, as a result, the white drop melts and flows through the central channel.

Using spontaneous great bliss to realize emptiness was the essential heart practice of the great Secret Mantra Masters of ancient India, such as Saraha, Nagarjuna, Tilopa, Naropa, and Maitripa; and of the great Tibetan Masters, such as Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa, and Je Tsongkhapa.

As in the past, so today – the Secret Mantra meditator's supreme path to perfect enlightenment is the union of spontaneous great bliss and emptiness.

For more information, see [Tantric Grounds and Paths](#) and [Clear Light of Bliss](#).

Taken from www.kadampa.org