
Personal Identity in Tantric Practice

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I want to take this opportunity to record some of the experiences and dilemmas that have arisen whilst engaging in tantric practice. I will not give much background information regarding the formal details of the practice as that can be followed up from my references at the end. Rather, I will write personally about how it actually feels to be engaged in tantric practice through time and then look at a western model of change that has been useful to me in making sense of my experience.

I started Tibetan buddhist tantric meditation in 1973. Previously I had meditated for some two years according to a hindu system. I was living in India at the time and meditation seemed very natural—part of acceptable, normal behaviour. I had in fact been in India several times and always with a sense of searching for something. I found great relief in the mess and chaos. It gave me freedom to relax and gradually shed the protestant work-ethic imbibed during my Scottish childhood. There seemed to be space for my own confusion and unformed longing.

At the time it felt as if I was being propelled towards something, though now, reflecting on those years, I have much more sense that I was equally running away from something. The conflicts I had at home, at university, in relationships and in myself could be ignored and transformed into an impetus for this spiritual quest I was undertaking. As a renegade social anthropologist I had abandoned participant observation in favour of cultural baptism by total immersion.

The one important thing that I found in Tibetan buddhism was the notion of certainty: the idea that there is an absolute reality that can actually be known, and not only known about from afar but known as the very essence of one's being. The fact that this belief was being propounded by people who were themselves displaced made it especially acceptable. Refugees, living in camps, often in great poverty—the ordinary Tibetans as well as the lamas—seemed to have an unshakeable optimism and a sense that social identity was not terribly important. For an alienated 1960s social drop-out this was very reassuring, and indeed I read the lives of the great Tibetan religious heroes like Padmasambhava and Milarepa as a vindication of social peripherality.

I was on the edge and in my perception Tibetan teachers were also on the edge. The focus was on future lives, improved rebirths and future realization. The preparation for becoming truly centred and grounded seemed to involve a great deal of social distancing and personal destabilization. Traditional texts and teachings are rather formal, coming across as statements of how things are. In the nyingma tradition the practices and their commentaries are factual, descriptive and elaborative. They do not go in for discussion and comparison, for they are designed to instruct not to furnish the reader with interesting ideas to develop conceptually. This style has the advantage of simplicity and clarity, but its very starkness also seems to invite personalisation. Coming from a western academic background, I was accustomed to developing meaning by juxtaposing ideas, letting books talk to each other in my mind so that new insights could occur. And, naturally enough, I applied this to the Tibetan teaching as a means of deriving a meaning that connected with my existing cognitive material.

It is one of the basic paradoxes that in order to receive the teachings one must be a pure vessel, a *tabula rasa*, free of defiling habits of interpretation. But then, to apply the teachings, one has to have knowledge of oneself and be in touch with all the prejudices and knowledge upon which one's ordinary life is based. Trapped within this, I, largely unconsciously, adapted the teaching so that it fitted my own predispositions and came to reflect back my own alienated sense of the world. Instead of adapting to the dharma, I was understanding it in a way that reaffirmed my own position on many things.

As an example of this I want now to focus on a particular practice that I have employed for many years. As is well known, taking refuge in the 'three jewels' is the basic act or attitude that distinguishes buddhists from non-buddhists. In addition to providing personal containment and orientation, taking refuge in the tradition also means not having to expose personal insecurity. For one can learn and use the language of the system, the 'dharma-speak' of technical terms and foreign words that helps to defend one against the pain and confusion of the struggle for felt, direct knowledge. I feel quite anxious about removing this familiar, comforting screen—anxious at the degree of confusion to which it will expose both myself and others. In order to avoid the defence and also not to feel too exposed, I am expressing myself in a very loose, personal way and not attempting

to tidy up any inconsistencies or make too much sense of it. In this way I can provide myself with a future defence of denial should I feel I need it!

The practice that concerns me here is that of the *yidam*, the deity to which the mind becomes bonded. The *yidam* I have used is a wrathful form of Padmasambhava. I have done the practice for about twelve years, sometimes intensively and sometimes in a rather nominal way. The *yidam* is described as being the bestower of attainments: the realized being who gives the actual experience of the inseparability of form and emptiness (*shunyata*). There are two aspects to the *yidam*: (1) the aspect that can be developed by one's efforts following the connection created during the initiation, and (2) the natural aspect which descends from its pure realm and fuses with the intentionally developed aspect. The first is the 'bond aspect', the mode that represents the potentiality generated during initiation, while the second is the wisdom aspect, the mode that blesses the bond aspect and transforms intention into actuality.

The practice itself can be done in long or short form, the short taking about twenty minutes while the long requires four to five hours. Whichever form is used, the essential point is to let go of one's ordinary identity and enter into the identity of the *yidam*. The practice I use belongs to *anuyoga* and so the focus is on experiencing the felt presence of the *yidam* rather than on the precise visualization of the form in all its details. The adoption of the new identity is done in an instant, like a fish turning in a stream. There is no need of any transition since the bond-aspect and the wisdom-aspect arise simultaneously. At the end of the formal sitting practice the presence of the *yidam* is experienced in all the aspects of the outside world. Everything becomes this divine reality. Each new session of sitting meditation is like a booster injection to the ongoing reality of the presence of the *yidam* both as one's own form and as the experience of the world and its inhabitants.

Presented in this way, there is a sense of gain, of the opening up of a new dimension of light and clarity, a continuum of awareness. This is what the text, the teaching and the tradition point towards, and in many ways it is absolutely true. However, in my experience, there is also a shadow side of loss that is not addressed in the tradition. The wish to be free of solely samsaric experience is a basic buddhist attitude. The urge is towards enlightenment, which may be seen as something quite other, or as a state which can both integrate and transcend samsara, the world of form. In either case, the focus is on attaining something new, though original, which is better than ordinary reality.

However, my ordinary sense of myself, of being 'James', is part and parcel of my experience of the ordinary samsaric world of people and places and things. I am attached to being James and, until now at least, no amount of trying to be the deity completely releases me from the sense of loss at abandoning being James. This attachment to being James does not manifest directly except as a restraint to actually doing the practice. If I think about it then, yes, I am convinced, both by the philosophy and by my own experience, that there is a truer mode of being than the ego conglomerate described by the term 'James'.

The effects of the deeply rooted attachment to an ordinary samsaric identity is experienced primarily, in a disguised form, as the affect of deep loneliness and absolute alienation that comes from time to time during my practice of the *yidam*. The clarity and luminosity of the presence of the *yidam* becomes overshadowed by a sense of being lost. Here I am in the midst of this cosmic vastness, all alone, wrapped in flames, dancing and roaring in the flow of destruction of all that is reified, substantial, familiar. What utter alienation and abandonment! All the loss of all that is familiar engulfs me ... I can't retreat and can't progress. Where am I?

The following lines by John Clare (1793-1864) give a sense of what I feel:

Written in Northampton County Asylum

I am! yet what I am who cares, or knows?
My friends forsake me like a memory lost.
I am the self-consumer of my woes;
They rise and vanish, an oblivious host,
Shadows of life, whose very soul is lost.
And yet I am—I live—though I am toss'd

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dream,
Where there is neither sense of life, nor joys,
But the huge ship-wreck of my own esteem
And all that's dear. Even those I loved the best
Are strange—nay, they are stranger than the rest.

Indeed it does feel like a kind of madness, a self-induced psychosis in which I seem to inhabit a parallel dimension, a limbo encompassing both heaven and hell. The dharma response to such an experience is generally to see it as an obstacle something to be worked through with faith in the ultimate value of the practice. Doubt is seen as error-and there is no place for any concept of '*the dark night of the soul*'.

Well, in a sense, so be it. Having taken the initiation and entered the practice I am committed to go forward and, as part of my total practice, to make use of

the *yidam*. But I also need a way of re-framing my actual experience so as not to get trapped in depressed and self-pitying perceptions.

The western model that I have to use in trying to make sense of my experience is that of Van Gennep's concept of the rite of passage. In this, he distinguishes three phases in the transition from one social state to another. The first phase is *separation*, which (to quote Turner, p.24) '*clearly demarcates sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time ...*' It includes symbolic behaviour, especially symbols of the reversal or inversion of things, relationships and processes secular—which represents the detachment of the ritual subjects (novices, candidates, neophytes, or 'initiates') from their previous social statuses. The second phase is *transition* and in it, '*the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are the most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states.*' The third phase is *incorporation* and it '*includes symbolic phenomena and actions which represent the return of the subject to their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society.*'

My experience of being lost in a limbo is an effect of both the anxiety of the separation phase and the ambiguity of the transition phase. Neither caterpillar nor butterfly, I inhabit a twilight zone of semi-identity composed of aspects of both past and future modes.

Well, is this all just fantasy? An indulgence of my emotions when I could be better served in working them through in the practice itself? Maybe so, and yet somehow the question of personal identity cannot be denied. For if I am walking about outwardly James but inwardly experiencing myself as something quite different, am I not guilty of bad faith with those I meet? Am I not turning social interaction into a charade? My work is with people. I do not live in a cave but in a city. There is tremendous pressure to retreat from the transition and separation phases and just be normal, doing my job, passing the time. It almost seems as if I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't.

It seems to me that at this time the dharma is practiced in two ways. The first is with the traditional view of the infinity of time and the endurance of consciousness. The practice of the dharma is that which releases one from being trapped in becoming. The second attitude is to perceive the dharma as a means of life-enhancement—a way of making one more able to cope with this present life. The second view turns the dharma on to one's life, adapting it to fit individual needs, while the first is about adapting one's life to the dharma and letting go of all that doesn't fit in. Commencing my dharma practice in India, I have been much influenced by the more traditional first view and this no doubt reinforces the kind of experience I have been describing.

One of the things that strikes me is that the tantric path of transformation affirms duality in a subtle way. As a path involving intention and effort it focuses on transforming limitation into enlightenment. Although I conceptually understand the

teachings about the nature of the transformational deity (*yidam*), I find I project all sorts of parental, saviour feelings on to the *yidam* which further increase the duality and inhibit my own possibility of attainment, Devotion is a strong urge in everyone and, when my sense of self-esteem is low, I easily get hooked into worship rather than practice.

Out of this confusion, I have found relief in the focus of dzogchen (lit. 'the great perfection', said to be the highest teaching in the nyingma tradition), which starts with the basic knowledge of one's own nature. Without that knowledge, meditation is said to be of little value as it remains within the relative dimension. This is certainly my experience. In trying to understand the dharma and the nature of the deity I lost all sense of myself. Now I concentrate on trying to observe myself and understand the working of my mind so that I will be able to recognize its habitual responses and remain in the presence of the natural state.

For as Polonius said in *Hamlet* (I . i i i) :

This above all: to thine own self be true;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Rather than adapting myself to the dharma or the dharma to myself, I want to understand myself in both absolute and relative dimensions. I had earlier taken the buddhist view of 'no-self' to indicate the abandoning of relative identity for identity with a deity. After much struggle, I find these grand aspirations unhelpful. In response to John Clare's plea '*I am! yet what I am who cares, or knows?*'—now at least I know where to start looking for the answer, and it is not to be found in the words of others.

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