

# Principles and Practices

This lecture by Dr. Ian Baker at The Buddhist Society (April 6, 2019) provides a masterly overview of the history and foundations of Vajrayana and Tibetan Yoga. Dr. Baker explores the transition from the renunciatory model of early Buddhism toward the Tantric model of integration and bliss (\*Sukha\*), detailing the importance of the subtle body, the practice of \*Tummo\*, and the Six Yogas of Naropa. His talk highlights the relevance of these visceral practices in the 21st century as an antidote to a purely cerebral approach and a means of reconnecting with "heart-intelligence."

[Desmond]: [Note: Brief introduction of the speaker and the topic of the day].

[Ian Baker]: Thank you very much, Desmond. It is an honor to be here on Founder's Day at The Buddhist Society. My book, \*Tibetan Yoga: Principles and Practices\*, has been a work in progress for many years, nurtured by decades of living in Nepal and traveling extensively throughout the Himalayas and Tibet. My goal today is to explore what Tibetan Yoga has to do with Buddhism and what its fundamental principles are.

Traditionally, we speak of three "turnings of the wheel of doctrine." The first is Theravada, based on the Pali texts and renunciation. Then came Mahayana, which emphasized the path of the Bodhisattva, compassion, and wisdom. Finally, the third turning is Vajrayana—the "lightning path" or "indestructible way"—which proposes achieving enlightenment within a single lifetime.

I am often asked about the continuity between these traditions. Vajrayana utilizes so-called "skillful means" (\*Upaya\*) within the Mahayana framework to achieve results more quickly and efficiently. There is an interesting etymological link: \*Sutra\* shares its root with the English word "suture" (a thread that ties things together), while \*Tantra\* means "weaving" or "woof." It is an integrated non-dual tapestry woven from the threads of preexisting Buddhist tradition.

In the original renunciatory model, the objective was to exit the wheel of life based on the Four Noble Truths and the recognition of \*Dukkha\*, or unsatisfactory suffering. \*Dukkha\* is a fascinating word: it refers to an oxcart axle that is out of joint or out of kilter. However, in the Vajrayana view, life is not solely about suffering. Life can be blissful (\*Sukha\*). Suffering arises only when we lose

alignment with our inner core, which is beyond pain.

All "completion stage" yogas (\*Dzogrim\*) of Tibetan Yoga are dynamic and interactive meditative practices that differ from the passive introspection of early Buddhism. You do not merely observe the breath; you interact with it, control it, and experiment with it. This dynamism allows one to accelerate the awakening process.

In Tibet, the lineages trace back to the \*Mahasiddhas\*—great adepts such as Virupa or Tilopa—who were wild yogis living outside institutional monastic settings. These original teachings were often radical and not always compatible with a celibate monastic culture. Consequently, we often see in Tibet a somewhat "awkward" assimilation, where celibate monks meditate upon deities in sexual union—this must be understood as a reinterpretation of practices that were originally existential and antinomian.

The human body became the new laboratory for Tantric Buddhist practice. As the Mahasiddha Saraha said: "I have seen temples and shrines, but none are as blissful as my own body." The core of this psychophysical anatomy is the central channel (\*Avadhuti\*), through which the Six Yogas are performed. This correlates with what we understand today as the hypothalamic-gonadal axis; it is the \*axis mundi\* of the human body.

Within the Six Yogas, the foundation is \*Tummo\* (the Tibetan term for the Sanskrit \*Chandali\*), which means "fierce feminine." It is a primal fire associated with the goddess that blazes upward from the navel to incinerate dualistic concepts and melt the "ham" syllable at the crown, inducing the Four Blisses.

These practices include physical exercises known as \*Trul-khor\* ("magical movements"), which prepare the body by opening the subtle channels so that the inner fire can blaze forth. They involve radical leaps and isometric postures designed to drive energy up the spine. It is vital to perform these under guidance, as without perfect breath-retention (\*Kumbhaka\* or "vase breath"), one can damage the subtle physiology.

I also want to mention the importance of the heart. Much of current dialogue between neuroscience and Buddhism focuses on the brain. However, the Tibetan tradition—especially the \*Dzogchen Nyingthig\* or "Heart Essence"—tells us that real consciousness resides in the heart. \*Tummo\* is fundamental because it moves us out of the head and into the viscera—the enteric nervous system—to illuminate heart-awareness from the bottom up. It provides a "visceral reality" as opposed to the "virtual reality" of pure visualization.

To conclude, Tilopa's Six Yogas are summarized in six vital points: let go of the past, let go of the future, let go of the present, do not try to figure anything out, do not try to make anything happen, and simply relax right now and awake. In the end, let us not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise, but seek what they sought.