

# Tibetan Yoga and Tantric Buddhism

This interview with Dr. Ian Baker, conducted by Maria Capron for Sattva Project, explores the intersection between the monastic and yogic traditions of Tibet. Dr. Baker—an anthropologist and practitioner who maintained close relationships with figures such as Chatral Rinpoche and the 14th Dalai Lama—analyzes how Vajrayana provides a framework for transforming desire into bliss (\*Sukha\*). He argues that these practices must be "upgraded" to resonate with the modern generation by integrating contemporary insights from neuroscience and somatic psychology.

[Maria Capron]: Welcome everyone. Today it is a special honor to introduce Dr. Ian Baker. Ian, thank you very much for being here with us.

[Ian Baker]: Thank you very much, Maria. It is a pleasure to be here and to share these ideas with you and the Sattva Project audience.

[Maria Capron]: To begin, Ian, your work has focused extensively on the lesser-known aspects of Tibetan Yoga, particularly those traditionally considered secret. Could you explain the fundamental distinction between the monastic and yogic traditions in Tibet?

[Ian Baker]: Certainly. That is a crucial distinction that is often overlooked. Historically, in Tibet, two distinct communities of practitioners were recognized since the time of Padmasambhava in the 8th century. On one hand, there are the red-robed monks and nuns who follow the \*Vinaya\* vows and live in celibacy within institutions. On the other hand, there are the \*Ngakpas\* or \*Naljorpas\* (yogis), who wear white robes and typically keep their hair long; they are not necessarily celibate, and their practice centers on the direct integration of bodily energies and everyday life.

The term \*Naljor\* (\*Yoga\* in Sanskrit) literally means "united with the natural state." While monasticism often emphasizes external renunciation and the control of impulses to avoid suffering (\*Dukkha\*), the yogic path of Vajrayana seeks to transform those very impulses and desires into a tool for liberation through bliss (\*Sukha\*).

In Vajrayana, we speak of the "Completion Stage" (\*Dzogrim\*), where one works directly with the subtle channels, winds, and drops (\*Tsa, Lung, Tige\*). The goal is not merely to observe the mind but to interact dynamically with deep physiology to achieve enlightenment within a single lifetime.

[Maria Capron]: That is fascinating. You mention the transformation of desire. For many Western practitioners, or even modern minds, this aspect of Tantra is confusing due to the traditional emphasis on visualization versus actual physical or sexual practice. How did this evolve within the monastic context?

[Ian Baker]: That is a vital question. When these radical practices of Indian Tantric Buddhism arrived in Tibet, they encountered a drive to establish Buddhism as the foundation of a theocratic state. Many of the original practices of the \*Mahasiddhas\*—which were antinomian and often involved physical consorts (\*Karmamudra\*)—were considered "uncomfortable" for a celibate monastic institution.

As a result, many of these teachings were "remonasticized." Very complex hermeneutical strategies were developed to interpret what were previously existential practices as purely symbolic or visualized acts. For instance, rather than a physical partner, a monk would visualize a deity or a \*Jnana Dakini\*. This created a sort of spiritual "virtual reality."

However, the danger here—as noted by critics like Abhinavagupta or even Chatral Rinpoche (\*Chatral Sangye Dorje\*)—is that the practitioner might become trapped in an intellectual fantasy or a visualized obsession, losing sight of the goal: the actual transmutation of visceral energy.

[Maria Capron]: Speaking of Chatral Rinpoche, he was one of your primary teachers. He always emphasized the importance of solitary retreat and living outside of institutions, correct?

[Ian Baker]: Precisely. Chatral Rinpoche was a living example of the yogic path. He used to say, "You can spend your whole life studying restaurant menus, but if you don't eat, you will starve to death." For him, intellectual knowledge without visceral practice and personal authenticity was of no value. He promoted what he called the "path of the secret yogi": someone whose internal attainment is so vast that it is not even evident in the outside world, thereby avoiding the traps of institutional ego.

[Maria Capron]: Ian, you mentioned that we are in a moment of "upgrade." How do you see the relationship between these ancient traditions and modernity, especially with advancements in neuroscience and psychology?

[Ian Baker]: We are in a fascinating era. It is no longer a matter of East versus West, but rather Traditional versus Modern. Today, we use smartphones and update apps constantly; if we do not, they cease to function. The same applies to the Dharma. If we continue to teach and practice exactly as we did one or two thousand years ago—without integrating what we know today about the nervous system, heart neuroscience, and the psychology of trauma—the message will not reach the hearts of the new generation.

Tantric Buddhism—and especially Vajrayana—is often defined as \*Thab-lam\*, the "path of methods." If we cling to the spiritual technology of a millennium ago without adapting it, we are being illogical. Tibetan Yoga has incredible potential for working with what we now call "somatic intelligence." By shifting from cerebral analysis to the experience of the enteric nervous system, to the visceral "fire" in the abdomen (\*Tummo\*), we can illuminate heart-consciousness in a far more direct way than through mere philosophical study.

[Maria Capron]: It is very inspiring. But there are also challenges, such as the role of women in these traditions that have historically been patriarchal.

[Ian Baker]: Absolutely. Monastic \*Vinaya\* is, in its origin, a "men's club" with rules designed to maintain that structure. However, Tantra and the yogic traditions have always possessed a deeply feminine and creative vein. Many of the great male \*Mahasiddhas\* had female teachers as their sources of transmission.

Nowadays, it is not just about women joining ancient male institutions, but about women leading a reform that recovers the creative and wisdom-essence of the tradition. There is a movement toward "Engaged Buddhism" that does not flee from the world but embraces it as the very ground of practice.

[Maria Capron]: Finally, Ian, what advice would you give to the younger generation who wish to start practicing Dharma today?

[Ian Baker]: My advice would be: remember that the Buddha is not something separate from you; it is not a statue on a shelf to be prayed to. Your own consciousness—endowed with intrinsic wisdom and compassion—is the very nature of Buddha. It is not about collecting complicated empowerments or multi-headed deities for the sake of accumulating techniques, but about using those tools to shift your personal preoccupation toward a transcendent state of open presence and bliss. Integrate the Dharma into your life creatively and lovingly, in harmony with nature and all other beings.

[Maria Capron]: Thank you very much, Dr. Ian Baker, for your time, your wisdom, and for sharing this space with us at Sattva Project. I hope we can delve deeper into the Nalanda tradition in the future.

[Ian Baker]: It will be a pleasure, Maria. Thank you very much for the invitation.