

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME FOUR

VOLUME FOUR OF *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa* is the first of three volumes that present the tantric, or vajrayana, teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Volume Four is path-oriented, Volume Five is organized around the themes of lineage and devotion, and Volume Six deals with what one might call tantric states of mind or tantric experience. Not every item included in each volume conforms exactly to this structure, but I have attempted to group material with some affinity together.

From some point of view, Trungpa Rinpoche's approach was altogether tantric, or grounded in vajrayana, especially in the teachings that he gave after coming to North America. However, for the purposes of *The Collected Works*, the published material that was particularly focused on vajrayana teachings has been gathered together in Volumes Four to Six. Interestingly, the majority of these books have been published posthumously.

Even when presenting the most overtly tantric material, Trungpa Rinpoche guarded the integrity of the vajrayana teachings, being very careful not to introduce material prematurely to his students and not to cater to public fascination with tantra. There was certainly plenty of such fascination when he came to America in the early 1970s, which made him even more conservative in his approach. In many of his early talks, he focused on what tantra was *not*, dispelling preconceptions of wild behavior, indulgence in "tantric sex," and bizarre surges of energy. His teachings on the dangers of spiritual materialism were, in part, designed to cut through naive misinterpretations of tantra, which he saw as potentially very harmful to young American spiritual seekers.

He was also quite well aware that the misunderstanding of Buddhist tantra had a history in the West that was not particularly easy to overcome. There had long been misconceptions about Tibetan Buddhism, which went back to opinions primarily formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as in earlier times. Travelers to Tibet, including Christian missionaries, and scholars reading Tibetan Buddhist texts with minimal understanding of the language—and less of its meaning—often misinterpreted the symbolism. Tibetan Buddhism was sometimes referred to as “Lamaism,” a generally disrespectful epithet that implied that Buddhism in Tibet was a distortion, some strange sort of primitive sect controlled by its priests, or lamas. Interestingly enough, the communist Chinese still use this term pejoratively to describe Tibetan Buddhism. It is as misguided now as it was historically.

There were notable exceptions to the closed-mindedness of Western scholars. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, Herbert Guenther, Marco Pallis, and David Snellgrove, among others, all had a very positive view of Tibetan Buddhism and had made considerable contributions to opening up the understanding of vajrayana, through their translations of major Tibetan tantric texts into English and their explication of the history of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Nevertheless, in the popular arena, there remained many misconceptions. In addition to the negativity about vajrayana, there was an equally problematic romanticism and a view of tantra as wild abandonment to sense pleasures. Chögyam Trungpa was well aware of both extremes, and in his characteristic way, he charted a course that addressed both concerns while pandering to neither.

In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* and *The Myth of Freedom*, his most popular books published in the 1970s (which appear in Volume Three of *The Collected Works*), he included material on the vajrayana, but only after properly laying the ground and only after many dire warnings about the dangers of trying to practice tantra without a grounding in the hinayana and mahayana teachings. He talked extensively about the teacher-student relationship, particularly in *Cutting Through*. There were other aspects of the tantric view, such as the five buddha families that describe five styles of human perception and experience, which he talked about quite freely. In addition to introducing the five buddha families in *Cutting Through*, he presented them in seminars on dharma art as well as in developing an approach to Buddhist psychology, which he called Maitri Space Awareness. He seemed to feel that it was a helpful way for

students to understand the varieties of human experience and to develop their creativity. There is no doubt that a vajrayana sensibility affected much of what he taught.

In 1975 he made a particularly bold move, in terms of presenting tantra, with the publication of the translation of and commentary on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This was a joint effort with Francesca Fremantle, an English scholar and a student of Rinpoche's. She produced the groundbreaking translation with his input, and she also put together the commentary—which was eye-opening for most readers—based on Rinpoche's teachings, mainly those given during a seminar on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in 1971. The style and language of the translation were a significant departure from earlier renditions. The English was evocative, elegant, and direct, and the book was very well received. The commentary from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* appears in Volume Six of *The Collected Works*. Remarks by Francesca Fremantle on her work with Trungpa Rinpoche are also included there.

The first book that appears in Volume Four is *Journey without Goal: The Tantric Wisdom of the Buddha*. It was published in 1981 by Prajñā Press, a scholarly press with limited distribution established by Shambhala Publications in the late 1970s. When Prajñā ceased publication, the book became a title under the Shambhala imprint.

Journey without Goal is based on a seminar given in 1974, during the first summer session at the Naropa Institute. The talks on which the book is based were recorded on video, along with all the other events at Naropa that year, so it's possible to see, outwardly at least, exactly to whom Rinpoche was talking. It was a large and varied audience of perhaps five or six hundred people, a young audience, the majority in their twenties, most of whom look like hippies, although some audience members distinguished themselves with more conservative hairdos and attire.

In his introduction to *Journey without Goal*, Rinpoche focused not on appearance but on the motivation and background of the students: "The audience was a very interesting mixture. There were many people whom we might call 'spiritual shoppers,' people sampling tantra as one more interesting spiritual 'trip.' There were also a number of people who were innocent and open. They happened onto this class by various coincidences and had very little idea of what tantra, or spirituality at all, might be. As well, there were a number of committed students who had

been practicing meditation for some time.”¹ He then points out the advice and the warnings he gave to everyone: “For all of these people, it was necessary to stress again and again the importance of meditation as the foundation of all Buddhist practice and the danger of ignoring this prescription.”² The book itself is filled with warnings: “Working with the energy of vajrayana is like dealing with a live electric wire.” “Tantric discipline does not cooperate with any deception at all.” “Every book written on tantra . . . begins with that warning: ‘Be careful; think twice; pay respect; don’t just take this carelessly.’” It might seem amazing that anyone stayed through the whole course! In fact, the membership grew rather than decreasing over the weeks.

Rinpoche lectured several times a week during the second summer session. (During the first summer session, he presented a course on meditation and a fourteen-talk overview of the Tibetan Buddhist path.) In the material that makes up *Journey without Goal*, he shows an extraordinary ability to speak on a number of levels at the same time, so that he is illuminating things for one group of listeners or readers while obscuring the material for another component of the audience. If you connect with what Chögyam Trungpa is talking about, *Journey without Goal* is an amazing book. Even if you stumble upon this book with no previous background, you can pick up on the energy and the enthusiasm of the material, although many of the details remain somewhat fuzzy. Although you might not understand everything, the book might still make you feel that you’d really *like* to know more about what the author is talking about. Rinpoche had a way of drawing people in without giving the goods away, even when he was giving away secrets. He wasn’t interested in creating some secretive tantric society that excluded people in what he would have termed a “self-snug” style. (That was a phrase he coined, which combined smugness with being snug as a bug in a rug.) He was also not interested in selling tantric secrets, the heart secrets of his lineage, on the street corner or in the lecture halls of Naropa. So he gave one talk that spoke very differently to different people in the audience.

Some of those attending his lectures were students who had graduated from the first Vajradhatu Seminary in the fall of 1973, where they

1. *Journey without Goal*, p. 9.

2. *Ibid.*

had received “transmission” to enter the vajrayana path and to begin their ngöndro, the foundation practices that eventually lead to full initiation into vajrayana sadhana practice.³ Outside of the Naropa environment, these students held weekly meetings, called tantra groups, where they talked about the teachings they had received, the practice of prostrations they were embarking on, and how vajrayana was affecting their lives. From time to time, Rinpoche met with them, answering questions or giving them new food for thought. Ask any one of those people, and they would probably tell you that Rinpoche’s talks were mind-blowing and that he spoke directly to them in the tantra seminar at Naropa that summer, addressing core issues in their vajrayana practice.

At the same time, these talks were not easy, for anyone. For some, especially his committed and more mature students, they were a challenge and an invitation. For others, they were intriguing but confusing; for a few, they were a closed door, a turn-off. Rinpoche would have had it no other way. He was happy to invite those with commitment, happy to intrigue those with an open mind, and delighted to shut the door on spiritual shoppers.

Journey without Goal begins with a number of chapters that describe different principles or components of the tantric path. The first chapter is on the nature of tantra and the tantric practitioner. It is about both continuity and egolessness. There are several excellent chapters on the nature of transmission in the vajrayana and on the relationship between student and teacher, who at this level is a vajra master. The extraordinary demands placed on both in the vajrayana are detailed here, as well as some idea of the extraordinary rewards that are possible. *Reward* is perhaps an odd word to use, since what is discussed here is complete surrender and letting go. Beyond that, through a combination of devotion, discipline, and supreme effort, it is possible that one will gain entry into the vajra world, in which the continued demands become the exercise of delight. Chapters toward the end of *Journey without Goal* discuss the different yantras, or stages, on the path. The final chapter, entitled “Maha Ati,” is beautiful and surprising, as well as profoundly simple. I don’t think you can read this book without being moved. If it’s not for you, you simply won’t make it to the end!

3. For more on the practice and the significance of ngöndro, see Trungpa Rinpoche’s interview in *The Torch of Certainty*, which is included in Volume Five of *The Collected Works*.

Judith L. Lief began the editing of the book while she was editor in chief of Vajradhatu Publications. When she left to become the dean of the Naropa Institute in 1980, in spite of a great deal of work on her part, the book remained unfinished. I took over the last stages of preparing the book for publication, assisted by Sarah Coleman, as well as by Helen Berliner and Barbara Blouin. Although the book had a number of editors, it has a unified voice, I think, and quite a penetrating voice. Trungpa Rinpoche wrote the introduction when the manuscript was completed and ready to go to the publisher.

The next book that appears in Volume Four, *The Lion's Roar: An Introduction to Tantra*, edited by Sherab Chödzin Kohn, is based on two seminars given by Chögyam Trungpa in 1973. The book itself was published in 1992 in the Dharma Ocean Series. This series grew out of a meeting that Samuel Bercholz had with Chögyam Trungpa in 1985, about two years before Rinpoche's death. They decided to inaugurate a series that would eventually consist of 108 volumes of Rinpoche's teachings. The intent of the Dharma Ocean Series was "to allow readers to encounter this rich array of teachings simply and directly rather than in an overly systematized or condensed form." At its completion, it was meant to "serve as the literary archive of the major works of this renowned Tibetan Buddhist teacher." Judith L. Lief was asked to serve as the series editor. Since 1987, she and Sherab Chödzin Kohn have been the two editors for the series. All together, eight volumes in the Dharma Ocean Series have been published, which leaves only 102 more to come! This seems like an enormous number of books, but given Chögyam Trungpa's prolific activity as a dharma teacher, it is not at all out of the question. He gave several thousand talks that were recorded and archived during his seventeen years in North America, no two of which are the same. There is more than enough material in this collection to complete the volumes in the Dharma Ocean Series.

Although it was subtitled "An Introduction to Tantra," *The Lion's Roar* is quite a difficult book. It would be very slow-going for anyone not already acquainted with vajrayana Buddhism and unfamiliar with Trungpa Rinpoche's general approach and some of his other writings. That said, it is a valuable book, which provides an overview and quite a lot of detail—from the tantric perspective—of the nine yantras. It contains material that will not be found in any of his other writings. The two seminars on which *The Lion's Roar* is based took place in San Francisco in May of

1973 and in Boulder, Colorado, in December of the same year. As the editor tells us in his foreword, “Here, the complete teachings of buddhadharma are presented fresh and raw. . . . They are the mighty roaring of a great lion of dharma.”

In *The Lion’s Roar*, Sherab Chödzin Kohn has reversed the order of the original presentations, starting with the shorter Boulder seminar. The San Francisco talks were given a few months before the first Vajradhatu Seminary, the Boulder talks just after the completion of that event. At the Seminary, Rinpoche introduced the formal study of tantra to one hundred of his most senior students, who would begin their vajrayana practice within a few months of completing the Seminary. It’s not purely coincidental that these two public seminars sandwich the presentation of vajrayana at the Seminary. Indeed, many of the themes and the view that he presented in that advanced program are previewed and echoed in *The Lion’s Roar*. Larry Mermelstein, director of the Nālandā Translation Committee, recalls Trungpa Rinpoche’s own comments on the significance of the first seminar in San Francisco: “I remember vividly the Vidyadhara Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche returning home to Boulder after this seminar. He commented, quite excitedly, ‘We finally did it—presented vajrayana for the first time in America!’ He regarded this as a landmark event.”⁴

The third book included in Volume Four is *The Dawn of Tantra*, a slim text, by Herbert V. Guenther and Chögyam Trungpa. This book was also edited by Sherab Chödzin Kohn, who at that time went by his Western name, Michael H. Kohn. Dr. Guenther is a Buddhist scholar and translator whose many important translations include *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, *The Life and Teaching of Naropa*, and *Kindly Bent to Ease Us*—works from both the Kagyü and Nyingma lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. As Sherab Chödzin Kohn said of him in the introduction to *The Dawn of Tantra*, “He has become one of the few Westerners to penetrate to a deeper understanding of Tibetan tantric texts. His books . . . bring us nearly the only accurate translations and commentaries from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.” Dr. Guenther has been criticized for using abstruse English philosophical terminology in his translations. Currently, there are simpler and perhaps more direct translations available, to be sure, but nevertheless his early renditions of Tibetan texts into English were,

4. E-mail communication from Larry Mermelstein to Carolyn Rose Gimian, May 2002.

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if not easy to understand, yet faithful to the original, and his attitude toward the tradition was deeply respectful, based on genuine feeling for the material and a thorough and penetrating scholarship. Trungpa Rinpoche had the greatest admiration for Dr. Guenther. These two gentlemen were brought together by Shambhala Publications, who published works by both authors. Together, they conducted a weekend seminar on the basic principles and practice of tantra, alternating talks, and this book is the outcome of that meeting.

Dawn of Tantra reflects both Dr. Guenther's scholarly approach and the more immediate, popular approach that was Trungpa Rinpoche's hallmark. It would seem that each man came closer to the other in this situation: Dr. Guenther's presentations are more accessible and personal; Chögyam Trungpa's contributions are more scholastic. In addition to the talks from the weekend seminar, *Dawn of Tantra* includes a chapter titled "Visualization" that was based on a talk by Trungpa Rinpoche at the 1973 seminar that became part of *The Lion's Roar*. The chapter "Empowerment and Initiation" was edited from a talk by Dr. Guenther in Boulder in 1973. There is a great deal of detailed material on the philosophy and practice of tantra in this little book. Its inclusion in *The Collected Works* as well as its recent reissue in Shambhala Dragon Editions make it available to a new generation of readers.

Volume Four closes with "Things Get Very Clear When You're Cornered," an interview with Chögyam Trungpa that appeared in *The Laughing Man* magazine in 1976. In addition to personal and penetrating comments by Trungpa Rinpoche on the significance of his accident in England in 1969, the interview focused on the challenge of bringing the vajrayana teachings to America. It's a very candid exchange. Trungpa Rinpoche talks about creating a language "specifically to translate Buddhist ideas into English in a way that makes sense to people." He also expresses his conviction that the vajrayana will take root and be fully transmitted in America. He ends the interview with this prediction: "Not only that. Eventually Americans can go back to Tibet and teach Buddhism in that country. . . . anything is possible!" On that cheerful note, we conclude Volume Four.

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