

Yidams - the Rapid Path to Mastery

For someone practising tantric Buddhism, the *yidam* is the very quintessence of dharma. Yidam is a Tibetan word meaning *mental bond* or *mind link*. It refers to vivid meditations designed to bring the Buddha's teaching to life in one's mind as quickly as possible, through practices taking a vast range of material forms, from those of well-known bodhisattvas such as Avalokitesvara, through 'ethereal bringers of wisdom' (*jnanadakinī*) to those of the complex mandala of Higher Yoga Tantra. Because they link one into the wealth of mind's potential, they are rightly called *mind links*. Because they bind one to the pure way of living that deep spiritual experience brings, they are *mental bonds*. In the sixfold refuge of vajrayana Buddhism, one seeks shelter in the yidams as 'the source of deep realisation'.

The yidam practice is a very personal one. Some Western sources refer to the yidam as the tutelary deity, although deity is a term which sits uncomfortably in this context. The guru usually advises the disciple which particular yidam to use, although in bygone days it was left more to divine chance, with the disciple casting a flower into a mandala of several yidams. Whichever yidam one's flower fell upon became the personal tutelary. Thereafter, the yidam remained a secret between oneself and the guru, and perhaps one's tantric brothers and sisters. It was firmly believed that whatever one gained from the yidam was directly related to guarding this secrecy and to the purity with which one maintained personal identification with the yidam, which became effectively one's new Buddhist *alter ego*.

Maintaining a pure connection (*samaya*) with the yidam is cultivated at first by observing sets of samaya codes proper to each yidam practice, one of which is a commitment to recite the prayers and mantras of the yidam a minimum number of times either daily or monthly. However, as the practice moves away from duty and becomes a profound experience, a more natural samaya emerges. Let us consider an example of this for the Avalokitesvara practice, which links one with mind's innate compassion. The beginner would observe ethical rules proscribing physical or verbal harm any living being. These would involve considerable training and self-restraint in, for example, such simple things as dealing with mosquitos, gardening or even holding a normal conversation. But the experienced meditator — who has learnt to fully identify himself or herself with Avalokitesvara —

will be so moved by a natural, universal love and compassion that harming any being would be out of the question, so much care is felt for them all, even down to the tiniest insect.

Each yidam practice is a tantric vehicle for transmitting specific dharma skills. Practising any one of them is a little like going to a specific artist to acquire the unique talents that person possesses. But behind this specificity lies a common essence, since the talents all spring from dharmadhatu, the primordial space of mind. A very interesting apocryphal tale is told in this respect. Atisa Dipankara was one of the main people who brought Buddhism to Tibet. In 1042 he met the great translator Rinchen Zangpo and when he heard of all the sutras and tantras Rinchen had translated into Tibetan exclaimed: *Perhaps there was really no need for me to come to Tibet.*

They were staying in a three-storey temple. At twilight, Rinchen Zangpo meditated on the Guhyasamaja mandala, located on the ground floor. At midnight, he shifted to the intermediate floor and meditated on its mandala of Hevajra. At dawn he moved to the top floor to meditate on the mandala of Chakrasamvara there. At breakfast, Atisa enquired: *Great Translator, why did you meditate first on the ground floor, then on the middle one and finally on the top floor?*

Rinchen Zangpo replied: *That way I can enter into each mandala in my mind and absorb the blessing of its buddhas.*

Atisa frowned and remarked: *There was, after all, indeed a real need for me to come.* He went on to explain the error of seeing each yidam as a totally distinct entity and pointed out that to master any one of them fully is to gain the keys to them all.

Popular among the common people of Tibet were the yidams of Avalokitesvara (Lord of Compassion), Tara (Protectress from Fear), Manjusri (Lord of Wisdom) and Guru Rinpoche, Tibet's special dharma master. In the prayer-halls of the monasteries were practised a host of peaceful and wrathful yidams specific to each tradition and sub-sect. In the isolated cells of hermitages were practised the highly secret yidams through which the meditator acquires yogic control of the body and mind.