

Practice Mandala - Lama Shenpen

Within the context of the Five Mandala teachings I have been giving this year, today I want to focus on the practice mandala. I have talked already about the Ultimate Mandala and the personal mandala, the ego mandala and the mandala of Awakening. There is much more to say about each of them, but here I am focusing on the practice mandala, which is the remedy for the distortion created by the ego-mandala.

The central principle of the ego mandala is avidya - the non-recognition of our own true nature, and therefore of the true nature of everything and everyone. The only remedy for that, and for all the suffering that is integral to the ego mandala, is recognition of our true nature.

The big question, then, is how do we manage to move from non-recognition to recognition? The Buddha lays this out in the Fourth Noble Truth, which is the Path. The basis of the Path is Right View (i.e. vidya). The final step is Right Samadhi. So the question is, how do we arrive at Right View?

I am calling the structure and dynamic of how we keep on the Path to Right View, our practice mandala. Once we arrive at our first glimpse of Right View (in the Mahamudra tradition this is called base Mahamudra), there is the mandala of moving through the stages based on Right View.

Before that, there needs to be a mandala of practising Dharma in the absence of Right View, or perhaps we should call it 'right view' without capitals. It is the mandala based on faith in the Three Jewels and the sincere wish and effort to put the teachings of the Three Jewels into practice - essentially, it means recognising that samsara is an endless cycle of suffering with no security and myriads of lurking dangers, as long as we do not recognise our True Nature and stop grasping at what is not real as real.

This begins with orientating ourselves towards our deepest Heart Wish - a sense that escape is possible and a longing to follow the path to Awakening.

The better we understand the nature of suffering and samsara, the stronger our sense of renunciation and enthusiasm for the path to Awakening. Reflecting again and again on the Four Noble Truths and the Four Thoughts that Turn our Minds away from samsara is the method for overcoming the ego mandala's persistent efforts to keep us enthralled by samsara.

How do we build our defences against the ego mandala's entrenched habits that make it so hard to maintain constant enthusiasm for Dharma practice? What, indeed, is Dharma practice at this stage?

We learn about the taking of Refuge and the taking of basic precepts.....giving our word that we will not give up our commitment to the Path of practice, we will keep within the bounds of right conduct (no killing, stealing, lying, sexual abuse and intoxicants) giving up the ten wrong actions and adopting the ten right actions and so on.

We train in keeping our word and learning to trust ourselves to keep on the path through this and all our future lives.

There is loads to think about and reflect on here. These are the samaya commitments and connections that keep us within the bounds of our practice mandala. As soon as we start drifting off beyond these bounds, the mandala guardians start crying out in indignation and even fear. They warn us to not overstep the mark - to watch out, come back within the fold - to the safety of the mandala of right conduct.

We feel the emotionality of approaching a dangerous edge - the edge of our practice mandala and the safety of our mandala connections (samayas). If we have gone against our vows and precepts and damaged our connections and mandala boundaries, we need to repair them quickly with admissions of faults and the determination to root them out and not let ourselves drift and be tempted in that way. We can feel in the depths of our being whether we are being truthful and trustworthy in this respect, or if we are being hypocritical and devious - just pretending to be genuine practitioners willing to follow the discipline of the path.

Honesty is vital at this point and continues to be all the way up to Right View itself - the recognition of our True Nature - even if that recognition is only for a fraction of a second.

There are edges and mandala boundaries everywhere because all mandalas interpenetrate. This means we are constantly confronted with dilemmas. For example, I have taken the precept against killing, and yet the green fly are attacking my plants. Gardening involves harming and killing creatures, either accidentally or deliberately - are we to become like Jain monks who walk around with a little brush to clear the ground of tiny creatures before taking a single step? Or is there a way of confessing and purifying our negative karmic actions as we go along?

Considerations such as these are about the nidana connections that keep our practice mandala on track. We put energy into keeping our precepts and repairing damage as

we go along the way. The mandala needs constant vigilance and maintenance - bringing it back in line with its central principle on an hourly, daily, weekly, monthly and annual basis.

Regular repetitive practice of all kinds constitutes the necessary structure and energy exchange that keep the mandala trim and intact - effective as a means of keeping us focused on the central principle.

The focus and expanding of mindfulness needed to keep on track is the EVAM principle - the necessary dynamic of the mandala. The discipline of constant mindfulness at bringing the whole mandala in alignment with our Heart Wish for liberation from suffering of ourselves and all beings, is the whole point of the practice mandala.

The mandala can be described in various ways, such as the six paramitas, (beginning with generosity, shila, kshanti, virya, dhyana and prajna), the accumulation of punya and jnana, the seven branches of prayer and so on.

At the same time, we need to keep a light touch. We need to maintain a meditation practice that tends towards deeper awareness and understanding of our True Nature. We cannot afford to take the ego-mandala too seriously, since ultimately it is nothing at all except a non-recognition of our True Nature.

Thinking and believing we are bad or hopeless failures is just more ego-clinging - it is not the practice mandala. For the practice mandala to be effective, we have to lighten up and at the same time maintain vigilance, honesty and seriousness of intent.

For this, there is nothing more powerful than the living presence of other practitioners and their good example of how to be. We learn from the example and the stories of the teachers of the lineage, including the Buddha himself. For example, in the story of the Buddha, we see how he only had to recognise Mara (ego-centricity) for it to weaken and slink away, unable to do any harm. Shame and embarrassment when we go wrong are what help us learn from our mistakes. So whereas a guilty feeling might be a practice mandala guardian telling us to watch out - remedial action is needed, if taken too far, the guilty feeling starts to weigh us down in negative feelings about ourselves, feelings which are actually just another form of ego-clinging!

There is much more that can be said about the practice mandala, but perhaps the key point to bear in mind is what Rigdzin Shikpo referred to as skill, beauty and play - the light touch.

The central principle of the practice mandala is the Heart Wish, and skill, beauty and play are the method for aligning with it. In meditation and in our daily life, we are constantly applying the skill of the mind to align with our desires - all of which emanate from our Heart Wish, however bizarre their final mode of manifesting turns out to be.

If we apply our skills unskillfully, we get suffering - as we suffer, we try to wriggle out of that by various movements, strategies and application of various other skills - each time noting whether that has led to the happiness or beauty we seek or not.

We play in the sense of trying 'this and that' to find what works and when we sense a good direction we get a sense of rightness and forward movement. If we are unskillful, this leads to an undesired outcome and we have to let go of that particular strategy and open ourselves to a new approach. This is where play comes in. We have to loosen our attachment to what we have been doing and explore our options - as we do when learning any skill, such as keeping our balance on a bike, or learning to play a musical instrument. You don't just keep repeating the same thing in the same way all the time - at least not until you have discovered the right touch - that is the skill and we know we have the right touch because of the beauty, pleasure, sense of rightness that we recognise and which accompanies insight of any kind.

This principle of 'skill, beauty and play' are necessary for the successful operation of the practice mandala but actually it works even at a relatively coarse level - we use it in our daily life all the time - both in mundane affairs as well as when we try to follow the path to Awakening. As has often been noticed by animal behaviourists, playfulness in animals is a sign of intelligence! In other words, although following the path to Awakening by building an effective practice mandala takes a lot of determination, discipline and hard work, all that has to be accompanied by a light touch and sense of playfulness.

Ultimately, skill, beauty and play are features of the Ultimate Mandala - our own True Nature. In other words, Buddha Activity works in the same way, but obviously at a much vaster and subtler level.