

# Samaya means to join together

by Lama Tendar Olaf Hoeyer



## Chapters:

- [1] Samaya means connection by a covenant, Tibetan: damtzig (དམ་ཚིག་ *dam tshig*). The derived meaning is Tantra vows.  
The deeper meaning is to maintain a connection to your own Buddha-nature. It is a holy ('dam') joining with Tantra practise, everything and everybody.  
(There are 14 root downfalls, whereby the very root to this connection is cut off. Please read Shamar Rinpoche's paper about this subject on this link:  
[www.tilogaard.dk/english/Shamarpa\\_on\\_the\\_meaning\\_of\\_Samaya.pdf](http://www.tilogaard.dk/english/Shamarpa_on_the_meaning_of_Samaya.pdf))
- [2] Misunderstandings about the meaning of samaya.
- [3] Samaya also means system or context as a concept.  
(In a derived meaning: 'the right time.')

I used to think, that Shamar Rinpoche's paper on this subject was exhaustive, but various recent scandals, particularly those of Sogyal Rinpoche and Trungpa Rinpoche's son Sakyong Mipham, have shown that this is not quite so. And they are not alone. Certain Tibetan Lamas misuse the concept of samaya for political purposes and social control. This misuse is both unethical and existentially most irresponsible towards the students and devotees of such Lamas. So some clarifications are in need. The public need to learn the true meaning of samaya.

Samaya is both ennobling and holy, so samaya will not bend to political or manipulative purposes. In stead it just vanish. If it actually was there from the start. It is not made out of thin air. When someone try to make samaya from thin air, all that will come out of it, is thin air. Please study the subject in depth and do not make a fool of yourself.

## 1.) Samaya means connection by a covenant -

a joining with the art of Tantra or a set of vows within Mantrayana. Samaya is the connection with the Yidam, the visualised Buddha aspect in a Tantra sadhana or meditation practise. Yidam sadhana is the indirect way by which you connect with your very own Buddha-nature. Yidam, Sanskrit: *Ista-devata*, is a visionary expression of the Buddha-nature. This expression is coloured by the different passions, concepts and karma complexities, Sanskrit: *caitasikas*, that may dominate the mind of people. That is why, there are so many forms of Yidams. By combining these problematic complexities with a Buddha form, that has the capacity to contain and hold these complexities within this form, these complexities are transformed into intuitive awareness (wisdom mind), Sanskrit: *jñana*.

This happens as you identify with the Yidam and take upon yourself the qualities of such a Buddha aspect. And perceive yourself as the Yidam in the course of the sadhana. This is called taking on the pride of the Yidam. When this happens, a direct connection with the Buddha-nature is established.

It is this direct connection that is called samaya. Because Buddha-nature or the 'Inner Lama' is actualised by such practises, the experience of the Yidam is accompanied by feelings of holiness and wonder. Anyway, this is the expectation, when everything has been done correctly and in a natural manner. There are more detail about, what may go wrong later in this paper. The connection is kept alive by executing the intention of the vows in actual life. The vows are all about, how to perceive the world in an enlightened and liberated way. It is called the 'pure view.'

In this kind of sadhana, the world as such is perceived as a 'pure land,' a Buddha land (Sanskrit: *Buddha-kshetra*) or paradise. All the sentient beings in the world are perceived as Buddhas and Bodhisatvas, who just enjoy playing, that they are ordinary beings, and therefore behave as such. This means, that it is only you as the practitioner of the sadhana, that imagine yourself to be a Buddha and therefore play, that you are so, at least within the ritual. Everybody else play, that they are ordinary, though they are not.

This 'pure view' is based on the fact, that the experience of the world is taking place in the mind, so there is really no dirt or sickness as such in the perceived world – only the perception of it – while everything you experience in reality only consist of the pure mind. Similarly, all sentient beings are in fact Buddhas. It is their real nature (*Buddha-nature*). They just do not know it. Apparently.

But since it is like this, we may as well perceive the world as clean and pure and all the sentient beings as Buddhas. The consequence of this pure view is exactly, that you cannot enter into conflict with anyone nor become humiliated by any event. By practising this pure view on everybody and everything, you are enabled to maintain the connection to your own Buddha-nature without much lapse. By training in this way, you will constantly be confronted with all sorts of prejudice – both your own and some from others, and find it easy to let

go of your own usual attachments and identifications, because you play being the Buddha, who is without such prejudices, attachments and identifications. In this way, you will experience having survived giving up and letting go and proved to yourself, that it is possible to do so. At least within the ritual. By keeping the connection with the Buddha-nature, also at times of such confrontations, prejudice cannot dominate the mind. They will not really get started, when they are provoked. So they will not evolve. This may stop a lot of karma and negative or unhealthy habitual tendencies.

On the other hand, it is easy to lose the connection, and in that case, samsara will instantly unfold in a powerful way. So, this way of practise application or sadhana is not devised for people, who seek to make a career and become someone in society with a steady income. The ideal practitioner is a homeless beggar, in India called a 'holy person' or sadhu. Many Tantra masters (Mahasiddhas) in ancient India were lay people, that provided for themselves by ordinary crafts in ordinary life as a way of living. Like Saraha who's profession was arrow making, and Tilopa who crushed sesame seeds to make them into oil. Actually, the word Saraha means the arrow-maker, and Tilopa means Sesame-crusher. There were of course also princes like king Indrabhuti. In their own time, they were not very famous for their Tantra mastery, and people in general was unaware of their skills and mastery of Buddhadharma.

## Tantra is secret

When someone is practising the pure view, it is not observable directly. Because as a practitioner, you will not be wearing a uniform, nor abstain from various activities, that happen in daily life on all sorts of levels. Samayas are therefore called 'secret,' because it is only you, who can perceive and rule your own experience – and your own reaction – of your own existential and subjective reality and situation. How you perceive yourself is not visible to anyone. It means, that others cannot see and evaluate, how you think of yourself and your experiences directly.

Samayas are also secret in the sense of holiness. It means, that you will be unable to really communicate anything about your experience of the sacred connection, that engulf you in the sadhana, so others may understand it in the sense you mean, unless they themselves have had such experiences.

Samayas are also secret, because the tradition demands it. This last principle is due to the sometimes quite unconventional acts, that are called for in Tantra, of such a kind, that would normally be perceived as immoral or repulsive. For instance to eat the five kinds of meat, which was regarded as repulsive in ancient India, where most people did not eat meat, especially not beef. The purpose of such behaviours is naturally to gain the ability to transcend and leave behind one's own prejudice and the norms of society. Otherwise, you will never be free.

There are several other reasons for secrecy in Tantra. First of all is it very dangerous to practise Tantra without learning the art by a traditional apprenticeship under a true master. Secondly, because you will experience something very holy or Devine, when you meet with your own Buddha-nature. Which will happen, when you do it right. Such feelings of holiness are very profound, so it is not something to disclose for people, who will laugh of it or desecrate your experience. To some, this is the main reason for secrecy. If Tantra is desecrated, the connection just vanish and is gone.

To view the world, oneself and all sentient beings, that you actually meet and live among, in a liberated and enlightened way, is by definition very problematic. In other words, it can only fail. When this happens, the practitioner is therefore expected instantly to let go of attachment and identification with the obstacle, that has arisen. And to apply the pure view again. The obstacle may be some prejudice, passionate emotions or some karma event (the 3 veils). In this way, the mind is kept open and without prejudice and the connection is kept going. Even for a homeless monk or nun, this is a very provocative attitude and practise to get used to. So a lot is done to protect the pure view.

Normally, samayas are therefore based on both vows for individual liberation as well as Bodhisatva or Bodhicitta vows. Also, it is normal to practise the six perfections (paramitas) from the general Mahayana tradition, in order to enhance the pure view. Tantra sadhana is simply an extension of Bodhisatvayana, or a special section of the Bodhisatva path. You cannot train in Tantra without an intension of no harm (ahimsa) both towards yourself and others. So, by practising Tantra, you also practise the meaning of Hinayana.

You cannot avoid occasionally to neglect the commitments or not manage to uphold them at various occasions. This may happen at any time, as long you train in the art of Tantra and have not yet reached the higher Bodhisatva levels (bhumis). So it is part of the training to become aware each time, you happen to disregard samayas, and then immediately to re-establish the connection. In other words, you must practically be identical to the demon *Rahu*, in order to break the commitments completely, without being able to re-establish them again. The most common way to restore the samayas, is by Vajrasatva meditation or Ganachakra rituals. Also genuine insight into the nature of – and the workings of – the mind, and realisation of natural Bodhicitta will at once establish the connection again. Remember, the connection rises naturally and disappear just as naturally.

Samayas are established, when the Lama initiate the students to their Yidam forms. There are many forms of Yidams, corresponding to the many passionate emotions, that typically unfold in various kinds of people in complex ways. The Lama will find a suitable Yidam for the students. The initiation is called abhisheka or wang in Tibetan, which means transfer of power. The Lama transfer his or her own power to liberate the mind to the students, so they may accomplish it themselves, thereby reaching full and complete enlightenment, Sanskrit: *Samyak Sambodhi*. In another sense, such initiations are called an

introduction between two, who did not know each other beforehand. So normally, the Lama will demonstrate the Buddha-nature to the students, Sanskrit: *darshan*. Some times it is called the ‘word initiation.’

To put it in other words, the students are introduced to perceive their own body as the body of a Buddha and so on. It is by identification with the Yidam, that the student may become liberated as a Buddha, at least as long time the sadhana is performed or actualised. **It is also this identification, that is psychologically dangerous for the students**, as well as being a fast path to liberation and enlightenment.

By such Yidam practise many thing may go wrong. Particularly so, because such practises generally are connected to the secret, very gymnastic and powerful yogas. If those yogas are not performed correctly, you may get very sick or break limbs. That is why the role of the Lama is very important in the learning process of the students, both to demonstrate the art, as a source of knowledge and insight as well as a protector against sickness and madness. And for that matter as an existential protector against unhealthy way of life and misunderstandings about the body itself and the mind. This important protection can only happen within the tradition of proper apprenticeship, when you cultivate true Tantra. Therefore both the Lama and the students have to posses human dignity, honesty, integrity, strong character and ethics, besides realisations of both the view of Dharma and meditation.

So, from this follows that it is not only the student, who has an obligation towards the Lama, because the security of the student is paramount, but also the Lama is obliged to take care of the students in the best way possible. Even such relations are of a professional nature, it will be like joining a family marked by the love of friendship, Sanskrit: *maitri*.

Even very high flying words are used to characterise the relation between Lama and student, it is in reality a classical thing between master and apprentice, that used to be the norm in the old days of craftsmanship all over the world. Do as master says for your own protection and security. In time, you will become a master yourself.

But it is not very easy to recognise a true master, and many Lamas are called masters, even they are not so. The title itself both means master and journeyman, so most times you will meet a journeyman, when you are presented with a master. The problem is, that there is yet no process of certification, that we can trust. To be a true master, the Lama must have accomplished the first tree of the four *dhyanas*, mastery of yogic trance or *samadhi*.

## Sutra

Most people will not encounter such problems, because they will not arrive at practising Tantra, but instead they will find themselves presented with training in the *Sutra* class. This is by the way also precisely the kind of practise, that most people need. In the context of Sutra, the Lama is a spiritual guide, coach, trainer and spiritual friend, Sanskrit: *Kalyanamitra*. The Lama is not so important and decisive within Sutra training, because Sutra does not imply the same dangers as Tantra. Within Tantra, the Lama must be obeyed for reasons of security, but in Sutra this kind of risks are absent. So, you should listen to the Lama, because the Dharma-teacher is the source of Dharma, but you are only obliged towards yourself. There is no samaya. In Sutra, it is said: rely on Buddhadharma, but not the propagator of Dharma. Respect the Dharma-teacher for giving and showing you the instructions, but do not worship the Lama as a Devine being.

In our modern times, Shamar Rinpoche recommend to us to go for Refuge in the Buddhas, and not in the Lamas. Therefore, he did recommend Mahamudra Ngöndro in the form of the *35 Buddhas'* sadhana, rather than the more common Refuge Tree of Gampopa, that is full of Lineage Lamas. The system of Gampopa aim at Tantra sadhana, while the recommendation of Shamar Rinpoche aim at Mahamudra according to the Sutra method. Shamar Rinpoche said, that Marpa used the 35 Buddhas' sadhana as his preparatory practise (Ngöndro).

## Guruyoga

Both systems have the discipline of Guruyoga, where the Lama is perceived as a Buddha. But it is only in Tantra, that the Lama is perceived to **be** a Buddha. In Sutra the Lama **represent** a Buddha. This is shown by there being a Buddha in the visualisation, where otherwise the Lama sit. In the 35 Buddhas' sadhana, this Buddha is Buddha Sakyamuni. In Gampopa's system it is the Buddha Vajradhara (Tibetan: *Dorje Chang*). In the Guruyoga of the Sutra class, the Lama is perceived as representing Buddha Sakyamuni, who is the source of Buddhadharma and the Guru of the ritual. Or as in Gampopa's system, the Lama is perceived as holder of the *transmission* from Vajradhara, that Tilopa got from a vision. So, within Tantra the Lama is perceived as an expression of your own 'Inner Lama,' your own Buddha-nature. The 'outer' Lama is a mirror of the 'inner' – Buddha Vajradhara symbolise the 'Inner Lama.' But in Sutra, the Lama represent the instructions, that you are trying to adopt and receive blessings from. So here, it is not the Lama, that is holy, but the teachings and all the Buddhas and Bodhisatvas, that the Lama represent without himself or herself necessarily being somehow holy like them. In Tantra, the Lama is an expression of your own Buddha potential.

Some people have difficulties with the concept of 'holiness,' because they have never experienced anything holy. They may have had such experiences, but rather interpreted them as 'blessings,' though. There ought to appear a natural experience, once samadhi is established as a consequence of training in meditation.



## 2.) Samaya is often misunderstood because - the Tibetans have watered out the concept, when

Buddhadharma crossed over the Himalayas and came to Tibet. In India Tantra was a completely secret set of teachings, that most people knew nothing about. But in Tibet, abhisheka was given openly and to great assemblies of people. It became a way for ordinary people to get a relation to the Buddhist masters – without engaging in a serious and continuing manner. So all these people did not become monks and nuns, nor did they perform long meditation retreats. As usual, only a few did such things. But in this way, the average populace came into contact with the mysteries of Tantra. And so also, they **formally** received samaya. But since this contact consisted in receiving blessing from the initiation, and not in becoming a connection with the Buddha-nature for use in sadhana, then the concept of samaya was weakened, watered out and – as it would become apparent in due time – the concept of samaya often became misleading.

Now samayas also came to mean a political bond or attachment to an individual master and some particular monastery or monasteries. It was not so much a connection with one's own Buddha-nature, as an attachment to a kind of prince or lord in both a spiritual, political and social meaning. Both the princely Tulkus and the monasteries were normally landowners, that rented the land to the farmers. The farmers on their side, would normally feel particularly protected by samaya to the Tulku, and often sent some of their children to the monasteries. But since these princely Tulkus not necessarily were liberated and enlightened, we must in general characterise such ties as misleading and repressive bonds, both in a spiritual and psychological sense as well as in a political and social. It was a setback for centuries for the whole Tibetan

cultural area, whereby these Tulku princes concentrated too much power in their institutions.

To the serious yogis in their mountain retreats, the worldly power of the Tulkus did not matter much, but the meaning of samaya was thus misused to bring people under social control. So in Tibet, the significance of samaya was turned into a lie. This has been going on for centuries and have become a very bad habit and a social convention.

### Keep samaya out of politics

This is an objectionable tradition, that none of us in the West ought to accept nor adopt. To call such a political bond for samaya is very wrong – or at the very least a completely wild exaggeration and a total illusion. Even so, many Tibetans cultivate such illusions, because of their clan alliances or family traditions.

Such alliances have generally a long and comprehensive history, that go back many generations and are intertwined with certain Tulkus, monasteries and various worldly partners to such institutions, both farmers, merchants, nobles and royals.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with political and social alliances. Society would hardly function without them. But it is highly misleading to designate anything with politics as samaya. Samaya is too private.

It is in no way obvious, how the Tibetans are going to get rid of this kind of misunderstanding, because it penetrates the whole of society, even it is in fact a lie. It has become an ingrown habit, that is not easily discarded.

We have to note though, that the Tibetan Tulkus generally speaking had a beneficial influence on society by bringing a peaceful attitude into the relations between everybody, when such influence was felt. In times of war, such influence was of course not felt. Not much anyway. The monasteries and Tulkus also served as a moral counterweight to the power hungry kings and nobles in the Middle-age. But it was not always, that this social arrangement was to the benefit for everybody. It ought to be obvious, that this development should not have taken place, because it was a lie, but Tibetans of our age only feel embarrassed, when such subject is mentioned. Apparently, the Tibetans are not ready yet to accept reform.

Also, Tibetans do not like, that people from the West try to teach them about their own perception of their own society and culture. It does not help to tell them, that samaya is from Indian Tantra, and not only for Tibetans. They feel a special ownership, which of course is also illusory. It is just a bad collective

habit and a misleading use of a holy concept. It is in reality a mess, that cannot stand or endure in the face of proper analysis. Since it is a lie, it is also unethical.

### Selective samaya does not exist

Samaya is not only a connection to a Lama. It is a direct connection to your own Buddha-nature. So, it is not only the Lama, that is seen as a Buddha, but all the sentient beings in the world at large, whether you like them or not. So there is no such thing, that might be perceived as a 'selective' samaya, even the Tibetans seem to cultivate exactly that in their alliances.

You will of course form a special samaya with those people that you learn and practise together with, and who are also students of the same Lama. But that is because of that special situation and fellowship that generate a special history and not a diminution of your commitment to all sentient beings, the practise and everything.

Samaya does not mean some sort of particular way of attachment to others, but it is a method of cultivating no attachment at all to anyone. In stead, what is kept going is the connection with – or the experience of – Buddha-nature, the space and clarity of mind, that so to speak all experiences are within. Just like the coffee in the cup. It is this relation that is so difficult to handle and realise under all circumstances. It is in this context that Tantra offers something quite special to come to grips with this kind of problem, by transforming the problem into the solution. You can do that yourself in your meditation. But it is not a method for transforming society, nor was it designed for social control, nor to serve princes and kings.

Politics and social affiliations is something radically different from samaya. Of course, also politics and social responsibility is about connections, but not about samayas. The political choices and affiliations of a Lama is therefore not something that the students have to adhere to, even the Tibetans seems to think so. We in the west particularly should hold on to the original meaning of samaya from India, a deeply felt connection or commitment to the training and everything and everybody in the world, and not a blindfold.

Blindfolded, people just become the laughing stock for everybody else, and there are no benefit to anyone. It is of course a good thing, that a clan in Tibet hold on to solidarity and some sort of union, but it has nothing to do with samaya.

In reality a lot is demanded for a Lama to bestow samaya, and for a student to receive it. They both have to qualify. And they often do not, I am sorry to say.

## The eight Karmapa

According to Shamar Rinpoche, the 8<sup>th</sup> Karmapa Michö Dorje said that if the Lama, that the student associate with, is not a true Bodhisatva and master of Tantra, no samaya can manifest to start with, because such a Lama cannot effect the connection, if he or she has no insight. When people anyway think, that they have received such a samaya from such a claimed master, all they get, is an alleged samaya. So it is a lie from beginning to the end. Even when the Lama, that perform the abhisheka, think that samaya is established. That could be the case, when the lama act in consequence of his traditional beliefs and culture. But this is not so, according to the 8<sup>th</sup> Karmapa. It is not enough to read a text aloud and ring the bell. It is like introducing the student to someone, but actually there is no one for the student to meet. So nothing happens, and no one is obliged to anything.

If the Lama has no insight; and if the Lama has not yet reached even the first Bodhisatva level or bhumi, the Lama cannot transfer the connection and therefore neither 'give' the initiation. Because what you are supposed to be introduced to, is absent in the ritual, that in this way is 'empty' in a negative sense. Something is missing. There is no Yidam. So, no meeting takes place. So, no samaya is established.

Hereby also ordinary people, that maybe do not have a very great understanding of Buddhadharma, are in trouble. Because how can they distinguish, whether any given Lama has any insight or not. Or if the Lama has reached the first bhumi.

It is of this reason important to get to know the Lama, before you engage in any discipline of Tantra nature. Start with a check on the good or bad reputation of the Lama. Many people have not yet understood this in spite of various scandals among Tibetan Lamas (Sogyal Rinpoche, Sakyong Mipham, Lama Norlha and others). When a Lama is also a Tulku, many people then think that naturally, it is a master. This is not necessarily so, because many Tulkus are appointed to their post and institution by many other reasons than the Lama being a reincarnation of his or hers predecessor.

(Read for instance the paper about the two Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoches:  
[www.tilogaard.dk/english/html/two\\_jamgon\\_kongtruls.html](http://www.tilogaard.dk/english/html/two_jamgon_kongtruls.html))

So, here is a simple and deep felt recommendation: do not engage in Yidam sadhana, before you are completely ready and have understood all the implications. In most cases, what you need, is not Tantra at all, but Sutra. Generally, you do not need a master, but a spiritual friend (Kalyanamitra). When you receive initiation to a Buddha form or aspect, the abhisheka will be given for the purpose of providing blessing, unless the Lama specifically point out, that the initiation is given for the purpose of practise, to start as soon as possible in a Yidam retreat.

In our day and time, a Yidam retreat lasting for instance half a year, cannot normally start immediately after receiving the abhisheka. Because of jobs,

family and the fact that the Lama is travelling all over the globe on a tight schedule. But if it is not absolutely clear, that the initiation is given for the purpose of Yidam sadhana now or a little later, then the initiation is only performed with the purpose of transmitting blessing of the said Buddha aspect; and in this case, there are no samayas.

If something else is claimed, it is an attempt to dominate and rule over the students. This is very objectionable. Unethical. And existentially completely irresponsible. In this case: get out of there! And stay away. Such a connection is very unhealthy, and there is definitely no samayas present, but just superstition and manipulation.



3.) Samaya may also mean the daily Tantra meditation practise - Sanskrit: sadhana. Such practise is typically a shorter edition of the full sadhana, that otherwise is practised in long duration retreats. By the daily practise, the connection is kept alive.

4.) Samaya also means a 'system' - that is in the sense of a set of 'coherent connections.' For instance the expression is used in a book title: Abhidharma-**samaya**-pradipika-shastra (of Sanghabhadra). The title means the 'Treatise that as a Lamp Illuminates the Coherence of Abhidharma.' Besides this, there is a derived meaning of samaya in the sense of the 'right time,' where again it is the coherence, that is being alluded to – not time as such.

Read also the paper by Shamar Rinpoche entitled Samaya: [www.tilogaard.dk/english/Shamarpa\\_on\\_the\\_meaning\\_of\\_Samaya.pdf](http://www.tilogaard.dk/english/Shamarpa_on_the_meaning_of_Samaya.pdf)  
Shamar Rinpoche explain in this paper the meaning of the 14 root downfalls point by point. It is also in this paper, that Rinpoche mentions the 8<sup>th</sup> Karmapa.

Read also the paper about Dalai Lama, who now want to abolish the whole tradition of Tulkus: [www.tilogaard.dk/english/html/tulku\\_reform.html](http://www.tilogaard.dk/english/html/tulku_reform.html)