

Bodhi Path and Lama Ole Nydahl

by Shamar Rinpoche

06.07.10

An Answer to Questions Raised about Bodhi Path and Lama Ole Nydahl

This letter is my response to two questions that I have been asked by many people. **The first question** concerns Lama Ole Nydahl. Since Lama Ole frequently explains the connection between Dharma and sex, emphasizing that the bliss of sex is the experience of mind, the question has arisen as to why I continue to support him. **The second question** is why the Bodhi Path Centers I organized are not Vajrayana. What follows here is a combined answer to both questions.

I believe that most of the people who ask about my support of Lama Ole are quite new to Kagyu Buddhism. Lama Ole came to Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim with his wife Hannah in the late 1960's in order to meet and study with His Holiness the 16th Karmapa. I was a young man then, only 17 or 18 years old, and could not speak any English at all. At that time I was a student myself. In fact most of the Tibetan Lamas in those days could not speak English and there was only one translator at Rumtek at that time, a Bhutanese doctor named Dr. Jigme. At Rumtek, Lama Ole received many teachings from His Holiness the late Karmapa and from Tenga Rinpoche. From time to time he had to go to Darjeeling to get his Sikkim permit renewed and while he was there he studied a lot with Kalu Rinpoche in Sonada.

Whenever Lama Ole visited me, he always talked to me about how wonderful it is that he learned all about tantric union practice from Kalu Rinpoche and Tenga Rinpoche. He thought it was just marvellous. Even though I couldn't understand English and he could not yet speak much Tibetan, I understood words like *dewa chenpo* [= great bliss] and *yabyum* [= male/female - the term for deities in union and union practice], which he would say while crossing his arms in front of his chest in the mudra of union. Then he would hug Hannah at the same time. In that way he combined the hippie lifestyle with tantric conduct.

Lama Ole came to India as a hippie who did everything with wild energy. Although His Holiness the 16th Karmapa advised him to calm down, he never criticized him directly as he was a westerner.

Actually Lama Ole's fascination with tantric sex is not exceptional, most of the western hippies who were interested in Buddhism liked it very much. In that respect he is not different from them, he has simply been louder than most about it. Kagyupa Lamas taught hippies the most about yabyum practice. Of course they taught it according to the ancient tantric traditions but western hippies understood it as a practice to turn their sexual desires and habits into meaningful sex.

In 1980 I came to the United States on my first trip to a western country. It was then that I finally learned how Vajrayana is promoted in western countries. I concluded that *Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche* and *Kalu Rinpoche* were primarily responsible for introducing tantric union practices to westerners. As far as I understand, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's philosophy about westerners is that they are highly motivated by sexual desire, inhabiting a realm of sexual desire. Because of that, he saw Tantra as fit for them. When Kalu Rinpoche taught union practice to westerners, he taught them that it was a Tibetan tradition that he had taught in Tibet in the same way. Indeed, Kalu Rinpoche was really highly trained in tantric teachings. The two of them strongly promoted Tantra in the West and as a result of their efforts tantric practice became a big hit in America, Canada and Europe. As the practice of sexual Tantra had already become popular, once they came to America and Europe the Nyingmapas then developed and expanded it more. After Kagyupa and Nyingmapa Lamas taught westerners about yabyum practice, then Gelukpas began to translate tantric texts and write books about it.

The only difference between Lama Ole and many other western Vajrayana practitioners is that Lama Ole publicly says everything and also encourages his followers to think the same way as he does. A consequence of Tibetan Lamas having taught Vajrayana to westerners in the first place is the view that sex is the heart of Vajrayana practice. My understanding of this can be described as follows: it appears that many western Vajrayana followers have taken sexual Tantra as their path. That path consists of preliminary sex, intermediate sex, excellent sex, and finally supreme sex. I do not mean to say that Lama Ole only teaches about sex. Of course he teaches beneficial practices such as Chenrezig, Phowa, etc.. When he teaches Phowa there are even clear signs that the practice is successful.

Lama Ole was deeply devoted to His Holiness the 16th Karmapa, and that is the basis of his connection with me. It is the continuation of the relationship he, as a Karma Kagyu practitioner, had with the late Karmapa. Nothing more and nothing less. My attitude towards anyone who is a follower of the Karma Kagyu is the same: if someone's attitude is the same as it was during the late Karmapa's time, our attitude is also the same.

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This brings me to the subject of the second question. After observing this movement for 30 years, my conclusion is that Vajrayana is not really suitable for most people in both the West and in Asia, including Tibet. You cannot generalize, of course. There are certainly exceptions, but in most cases it is not suitable. Since sex is taught as the main core of tantric practice in the West and this does not benefit anyone, what is generally practiced as **Tantra in the West is based on a big misunderstanding.**

I have paid close attention to the kinds of qualities required to ensure the suitability of tantric practice for particular people. It depends on the three factors of cause, condition and effect. **The cause:** people who have some karmic connection to it. Though one may be in a lower human life, some deep karma is the cause of one's connection to Vajrayana practice. **The condition:** the conditions conducive to tantric practice are, generally, that one belongs to a society that is in nature quite aggressive and one must be filled with emotions. **The effect:** though one lives in bad conditions, in other words the afflictions are stronger, at the same time one has strong willpower to struggle against hardships. Therefore tantra was very suitable during the middle ages in Asia. For example, it flourished at a time in India when people became more aggressive and suffered from more afflictions. It also remained suitable until around the 14th century in Tibet and the Himalayas.

I think that nowadays the Bodhisattvayana with a high level of meditation is most suitable for the majority of people. That is why I organized Bodhi Path Centers to combine Atisha's *Kadampa* lineage with *Mahamudra* meditation in Gambopa's tradition. There are actually two uses of the term Mahamudra within Gampopa's work: one is tantric and the other is his explanation of the meditation that Buddha taught in the *Samadhiraja sutra*. We see the latter in the titles of texts he wrote about meditation that are based on the Samadhiraja Sutra. When I use the term Mahamudra here, I am referring to the Mahamudra of the Samadhiraja meditation tradition, not to the tantric Mahamudra.

Bodhi Path Centers are established as learning centers. They are places where you can learn Dharma, learn and practice meditation, and continue to lead a normal life. Bodhi Path is not an organization that enforces compulsory rules of behaviour. The moral conduct that we encourage is simply the avoidance of the **10 non-virtues:** avoid the physical non-virtues of **kill**ing, **steal**ing, and **sexual mis**conduct; the verbal non-virtues of **ly**ing, **slan**der, **harsh speech** and **divisive speech**; and the mental non-virtues of **hatred**, **desire**, and **ignorance**. In addition to that, practitioners should avoid **intoxication** and **blind faith**. Keeping these guidelines

of moral conduct is your **protection**, not a set of laws to be followed for their own sake. You should learn what these non-virtues are and learn to avoid them. The Buddhist view of moral conduct is that it will shield you like strong armour.

In addition to avoiding the 10 non-virtuous actions, intoxication and blind faith, you should learn and implement the attitude of a Bodhisattva: *Bodhicitta* [the **enlightened attitude of compassion and the wish of happiness for others**]. This will help you to accumulate vast amounts of merit. Combine this with learning how to meditate according to the teachings on mindfulness and you will achieve the best results.

In the Buddha's time, becoming a monk or a nun meant full renunciation. Monastics renounced everything. They spent their days and nights in meditation, begged for food from villages and towns, and didn't have so much as a penny. It was especially important for them to keep strict discipline since they had to show themselves to be different from ordinary beggars through their conduct. They had to keep their dignity. In all developed countries these days, both in the West and in Asia, becoming a monk or a nun is no longer the only or best possibility to really implement the teachings. On the one hand, where people pay lots of taxes, insurance, etc. it is not practical to live as a monastic; and on the other hand, in the Tibetan tradition monks and nuns do not in any case keep the full Vinaya discipline. It's not that it is impossible to become a monk or nun any more, but I think it is unnecessary unless you can keep the discipline of full ordination which means keeping the 253 vows, etc..

The suitability of particular practices and lifestyles is dependent on the era we live in and the nature of the society we live in. Whatever is the most suitable method for transforming people is the highest Yana [vehicle]. Likewise, what is suitable for fewer people is the middle yana, and what is suitable for very few people is the lowest or so-called Hinayana. All methods for attaining enlightenment were given by the Buddha, but the one most suitable for your development as it is taught to you by a master, [that] is the supreme Yana. Therefore the curriculum in my Bodhi Path Centers is based on the suitability for people today. While some Vajrayana practice is of course alright, like Chenrezig practice, for example, for the most part I recommend that practitioners concentrate on avoiding the ten non-virtuous actions, keeping the bodhisattva attitude, and learning the levels of mindfulness.

- Shamarpa

www.shamarpa.org

A comment about this letter by Lama Tendar Olaf Hoeyer

25.07.2010

Since this letter was issued from Sharmarpa's Office on the 7th of July 2010, there seems to have been raised some objections to his descriptions of Lama Ole Nydahl. *Who raised what objections and when and to whom*, I do not know exactly. Anyway, the announcement on Sharmarpa's website have changed into a mere description of Sutra and Tantra within Bodhi Path. In fact, the whole first part of the letter have been removed from the web page. I conclude, that some pressure have been put on Shamar Rinpoche to this effect, because Tomek Lenart from Diamondway Buddhist Centers called me on the phone, and asked me to remove the same section of Sharmarpa's letter from Tilogaard's website. To me that seems to be some kind of bad politics. In an open society like Denmark, you cannot withdraw information, once it is published. If the information demands clarifications - that is, what should be done. In this case, I see no need for either action. I think that Sharmarpa has yielded to Diamondway Buddhist Centers demands in order to show support for Lama Ole Nydahl, because of his strong support of the 17th Karmapa Thinley Taye Dorje. Even so, it is still bad politics. I do not like it. In this way it may seem, that Lama Ole Nydahl is really censuring Sharmarpa. It may very well appear as very rude and improper behaviour by Ole Nydahl towards the higher and more experienced Lama Shamar Rinpoche. Since no explanation is given for all of this, anyone may speculate whatever about it, and none of this was really necessary. Something is wrong in the political thinking of Diamondway Buddhist Centers. I do not support bad politics.

I have been in the Karma Kagyu Sangha for a long time and have some authority in my own right as a western Lama. The full text in Sharmarpa's letter has great relevance to the general public concerning *Sutra* and *Tantra* in the modern days. So, the full text of the letter is still here on my website, since some people will find it of interest, and because this is the official letter that I received previously. Whether Lama Ole Nydahl has misunderstood the point of Vajrayana or not, that is his own concern, but there are in no way allegations from Shamar Rinpoche of such nature in this letter. If anyone finds the text to mean that, it is because they want it to be so. Any practitioner of Vajrayana should try to get and hold the point of Tantra all the time and not misunderstand the instructions. Rinpoche is making a general statement about western ideas of Tantra. Indeed he has a point. You have to let go of attachment to erotic activities when you practice *Karma-mudra* within Vajrayana. Sex as such is not an obstacle to enlightenment. Attachment to sex is. Erotic Tantra is not a system to enhance sex. It is a system to let go of attachment to sex, and it is not the highest nor the only tantric system of yoga and meditation, and it is certainly not the easiest path for many reasons.

Lama Tendar Olaf Høyer,
Tilogaard Bodhi Path Center.