

On the Meaning of Samaya

by Shamarpa Rinpoche

Samayas or commitments are essential in that they aid the practitioner in refraining from mistakes which, if engaged in, would damage his or her practice and thus counteract progress on the path (to enlightenment).

Samayas are different depending on the particular level upon which their respective teachings are given. Commitments taught in the context of Theravada, Vinaya, are different from those recommended in Mahayana. The samayas of Mahayana in general are again different from those involved in tantric practice. Within Vajrayana, samayas are also distinct according to their respective levels, Kriya-, Charya-, Yoga- and Annuttarayoga-tantra.

In order to practice the path, which involves various samayas, it is necessary to rely on a lama who should be qualified in the following:

- Learned in Sutrayana and Tantrayana and skilful in teaching
- Experience in meditation practice.

These two qualities which are described in many tantras are essential with respect to Tantrayana. In Sutrayana as well both should be united.

A lama who is learned in the dharma but lacks experience in meditation is of middling capacity. An individual who unites both, knowledge of dharma and experience in meditation is of highest capacity. With regard to judging the capacities of a lama one can distinctly judge knowledge and skill in teaching due to his or her educational background. The depth of experience in meditation, however, cannot be evaluated by others.

Further criteria concerning an authentic teacher other than that mentioned above are not reliable. Some may claim themselves to be an emanation of Amitabha, Chenrezig, Manjushri or others. If these individuals do not have good qualifications in terms of dharma knowledge and / or experience in meditation they should not be considered as authentic lamas.

In the west people are easily impressed from the charisma of teachers and by certain behavioural patterns. Due to these characteristics individuals are considered high lamas. In the east, particularly in the chinese society, people are impressed with those who speak English well and with someone who presents himself as an emanation of a specific yidam or bodhisattva. If one accepts such criteria, it is not certain that one will meet a qualified lama. One could have great luck and meet an authentic lama who possesses charisma and excellent qualification. Furthermore one might have greater luck and

encounter a very charismatic person who is the Buddha himself. In many cases, however, one will meet lamas who lack the necessary qualities.

Today there are many buddhist teachers who offer an abundance of excellent dharma. Unfortunately, at the same time, there exist unqualified teachers who misuse their spiritual influence. For example, they infer that if a student performs a certain action which is in discord with the teacher, he will break his samaya. This is often the case in individuals who do not possess the necessary qualities of a spiritual leader but nevertheless present themselves as Vajrayana teachers.

The first point of the 14 major mistakes by which one breaks the samaya involves disrespect towards the teacher. An unqualified teacher who misuses his spiritual position may present the 14 major mistakes as a rule claiming that if the student was to contradict this system, he would be reborn in low states of existence.

One therefore requires a teacher who is learned and skilful in presenting dharma. If such a teacher is not encountered and one relies only on an unqualified individual, even if the student was to receive 1000 empowerments from this person he would therefore not need to worry about breaking samayas in that he never received the samayas in the first place. This was pointed out by the 8th Karmapa Mikyo Dorje.

With respect to participating in particular empowerments and instructions it is not enough to simply be present in order to receive the full benefit. If the student is not conscious of the deep meaning of the background he will not genuinely encompass the full meaning of Vajrayana. In this case he should not consider himself as an authentic Vajrayana practitioners with the respective samayas. If, however, the student is aware of the deep meaning of Vajrayana, the practice involves upholding samayas which in itself is an indication that he is established in the Vajrayana and for his qualification to do this practice. Proper knowledge of dharma is the necessary basis for Vajrayana practice in that it entails an awareness of certain mistakes to be avoided. Consciously maintaining samayas, due to ones knowledge, will therefore lead to protection of ones practice and thus ensure development on the path.

The following 14 major mistakes refer to actions which damage ones practice entirely. Therefore they are also named the 14 rootdownfalls. These are presented according to the Annuttarayogatantra, in specific, the Tantra of the red Avalokiteshvara (*Gyalwa Gyamtso*).

The 14 major mistakes by which one breaks the Vajrayana samayas:

1. To physically or verbally harm ones Vajra-master or to entertain wrong views of him:

The vajra-master is that specific lama from whom the practitioner receives empowerments, explanations on the Vajrayana meditation practice and essential instructions concerning the actual meaning of that practice.

The following concerns background explanation regarding the breaking of samaya by means of harming the vajra-master: With respect to Vajrayana practice, especially in the Annuttarayogatantra, the outer world including sentient beings is transformed into a pure aspect. The lama is considered as the centre or main yidam, deity of the mandala. Causing harm to the lama will therefore damage the main yidam deity which will furthermore negatively effect the remaining mandala.

The samaya is broken when the following conditions are present:

- one is fully aware of a lama to be his or her vajra-master and consciously physically or verbally harms this person
- awareness that ones actions will displease the vajra-master
- feeling no regret after having harmed the vajra-master

In one entertains wrong views concerning the lama and furthermore has the intention to harm him without physically or verbally hurting him, the samaya is not broken completely but damaged.

The samaya is considered to be of a small, an average or of a great extent depending on the strength of the relationship of the student to the vajra-master. From among the three aspects of the Vajrayana relationship (**empowerment, explanations and essential instructions**) if only empowerment is received, the samaya will be of a small degree. If a combination of two of these three aspects is received, the samaya will be of an average degree and if all three aspects are involved, the samaya is of the greatest degree. Accordingly a broken samaya is graded into small, average and great.

2. To oppose the teachings of the Buddha:

Certain teachings of the Buddha may be disliked by a practitioner. It is acceptable to disregard those teachings which do not seem suitable to an individual. However, the Vajrayana samaya will be broken if one opposes these particular teachings. An example of an opposition against the Buddha's word means for instance to slander certain segments of his teachings such as abusing the Theravada or Mahayana.

3. To have strong negative emotions with other sentient beings:

This refers to negative tendencies such as anger or jealousy which one generally extends to sentient beings. Secondly the samaya is broken if one projects anger against those who have taken the refuge and bodhisattva vow. Thirdly the samaya is broken if hatred, jealousy etc. are projected towards those on the Vajrayana path, especially when one belongs to the same spiritual community, the same mandala or has received empowerments, explanations and essential instructions together.

In order to purify clinging to the outer world, the notion of the world reflecting a pure mandala of a specific yidam-deity, is generated. In order to purify ones clinging to sentient beings one visualizes them as yidam-deities. A sincere relationship among those practitioners who share this mutual vision is therefore established. This close relationship is known as vajra-relatives. Projecting negative tendencies against vajra-relatives would damage this bond and have a destructive influence on ones practice. For this reason one should refrain from selfish anger, jealousy and in general fighting with one another.

4. To abandon the attitude of loving kindness:

After having generated the bodhicitta attitude, the samaya is broken if the attitude of loving kindness and compassion towards all sentient beings is abandoned. Furthermore the samaya is broken if a sudden negative emotion leads to rejection of an individual, therefore excluding him or her from ones wish to benefit all sentient beings. If one does not regret this attitude, this contributes as well to a broken samaya.

5. To go astray in ones clinging to sexual bliss and to abandon Bodhicitta:

In the developmental phase of the Vajrayana path, the practitioner identifies with the body of the yidam-deity. This is a method to overcome the clinging to the ordinary body. The biological potential for birth is the ejaculation of the bindhu. In order to overcome the habitual tendencies relating to the bindhu, the Vajrayana meditation involves generating the seed syllable of a yidam-deity from which the yidam then manifests.

Meditation techniques of highly advanced practitioners of Vajrayana involve sexual excitement as a method. The meditative experience is increased by realisation of the inseparability of sexual bliss and emptiness.

This level of practice, however, is applicable only when the attachment to sexual excitement is overcome.

Monks break their vinaya vows and the Vajrayana samaya if they were to use these techniques improperly out of attachment to sexual satisfaction. Lay people break their Vajrayana samaya if they misuse these methods, pretending to be a practitioner on this level without full knowledge of their proper application.

6. Abusing other traditions with the motivation of gaining more respect for oneself:

An individual who asserts himself to be a Vajrayana practitioner and criticises other traditions such as Theravada, Mahayana, Christianity or Hinduism, often possesses the mistaken motivation of simply drawing attention towards himself.

Criticising the Sutrayana is especially negative due to the fact that Tantra is based on Sutra. Criticising in particular the teachings of the Prajnaparamita and of Madhyamaka is even more harmful in that these constitute the very essence of Tantra practice. This behaviour therefore contributes to the breaking of samayas.

It is fully accepted and has no relation to the breaking of the samayas if criticism with a positive intention is formulated in order to clarify each others viewpoints.

7. To reveal secrets to those who are not spiritually mature:

If one describes the meaning of great bliss as taught in Vajrayana to individuals who do not possess the required educational background, they might misunderstand and abuse these teachings. This will contribute to the breaking of the samaya.

8. To harm the human body:

The human body is the support for dharma practice, the basis upon which realization of the two buddhakayas is attained. With respect to Vajrayana the human body is considered to be an important instrument on the path.

Therefore exposing the body to extreme conditions such as whipping, burning or destroying it by suicide, contributes to the breaking of the samaya.

At the same time, one should not assume the opposite extreme of adorning ones body and regarding it to be more important than it is.

9. Having doubts regarding the absolute truth:

This refers to an incomplete understanding of the meaning of Madhyamaka. Clinging to mere emptiness without comprehension of the relative truth contributes to the breaking of the samaya. This point also involves doubts concerning whether sentient beings can attain buddhahood. Furthermore it includes mistrust of the potential wisdom in the mind of all sentient beings. It also refers to doubts concerning the non-conceptual state of mind and the perfect wisdom of a Buddha.

10. To refrain from forceful activity when needed:

Sometimes it is not possible to overcome destructive influences due to negative energies by applying peaceful methods only. Of course, in terms of benefiting sentient beings, a mind of loving kindness and compassion should always be present. The activities required to quell any particular situation must be specifically ascertained and the corresponding methods applied. Forceful methods should be applied when its is the only means to prevent individuals from committing negative actions which harm themselves and others. If one refrains from forceful activity when it is needed, especially if one has the capacity to perform in such a manner, this contributes to the breaking of the samaya.

In pretending to overcome negative influences and in using this point as an excuse, one carries out certain rituals which cause harm to others, is a total misunderstanding and misuse of forceful means.

11. Doubts regarding the meaning of suchness:

This refers to individuals who are unable to comprehend the true nature of phenomena and merely conceptualise on the nature of phenomena. To

entertain doubts as to the true nature of all phenomena involves the breaking of the samaya.

12. To annoy sentient beings:

This refers to irritating other beings out of self concern, especially to annoy or distract individuals who are practising the dharma. Due to jealousy, abusing yogis who demonstrate various unconventional practices, also contributes to the breaking of the samaya.

13. To refrain from certain behaviour when appropriate:

During specific occasions the Vajrayana master, who should be a highly qualified teacher, will require that the student carries out certain practices such as secretly eating the 5 types of meat, drinking the 5 kinds of nectar and dancing nakedly. This is requested in order to test whether or not conventional concepts are relinquished. If, due to moral tendencies, one hesitates or refrains from carrying out these rituals, this contributes to the breaking of the samaya.

14. To abuse women:

Within Vajrayana women are considered to be the embodiment of wisdom. Regarding women as inferior or abusing them as witnessed in certain cultures, contributes to the breaking of the samaya.

Breaking one or a number of these 14 points requires purification within a short period of time. The most optimal is to purify this difficulty within one day. From among the various practices offered, an effective and simple method concerns the meditation and recitation of Vajrasattva. This practice involves the flow of nectar throughout the body by which all defilements and broken commitments will be purified. Due to conscious and unconscious reasons one often breaks the samayas. It is therefore recommended to apply this practice at least once or twice a day.

Translated by Tina Draszcyk. February 1993.