



The Psychology of Tantra

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Buddhahood is the Goal

FROM THE MAHAYANA BUDDHIST point of view, all sentient beings possess Buddha nature, the potential to become a Buddha, just naturally. This potential defines us. For the Tibetan Buddhist, every practice—from the most basic: harnessing the energy of our behaviour; to the most advanced: tantric meditation—is for the purpose of achieving Buddhahood, enlightenment. The Tibetan word for ‘Buddha,’ *sang-gye*, conveys the meaning beautifully: *sang* implies the utter eradication of all negative states of mind, all delusions, which Lord Buddha has established to

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be adventitious; and *gye* implies the development to perfection of all positive states, all goodness, which he has found to be at the core of our being.

What are the implications of this bare-bones etymology? How does a Buddha exist and function? Buddhas have three essential characteristics: infinite wisdom, infinite compassion, and infinite power. They pervade existence and are omniscient: they see perfectly all phenomena without mistake, especially the minds of all sentient beings, their past and future. Beyond the dualism of a separate sense of self, they have effortless empathy with every one of these sentient beings and exist only to benefit them. And they have the power to manifest simultaneously in countless bodies throughout countless universes to joyfully

do whatever needs to be done to benefit these countless sentient beings and lead them to their own Buddhahood, no matter how long it takes.

What is the Mind?

Besides the body of a sentient being, which is made up of the four elements, Buddha does not assert any phenomenon other than mind—or consciousness: these are synonymous—such as a self or spirit or soul. The presence of consciousness within this body of ours makes us a sentient being, in Tibetan, *sem-chen*: mind-possessor. And it's the mind that becomes enlightened.

It has several characteristics. First, it is defined as that which is clear—in other words, not physical—and that which knows, or cognises, or is aware. Cognises what? Finally, that which exists. Obviously mind exists in dependence upon a body, at least at the grosser levels, but it is not a function of the body.

Second, as implied by the etymology of *sang-gye*, consciousness is pure in its nature.

Third, mind encompasses the entire spectrum of our inner being: intellect, feelings, emotions, unconscious, subconscious, instinct, intuition, as well as our sensory experiences, those parts of our mind that function through the medium of the eye, the ear, and so forth.

Fourth, our consciousness is not the handiwork of any external source, neither a creator nor our parents. In fact, there's not an atom of our being that comes from a superior being, although indeed our body comes from our kind parents. We don't need creating; our mind is a beginningless continuity of mental moments, each moment of awareness necessarily being the result of—having as its substantial cause—the previous moment of cognition in that very mindstream, or mental continuum. Mind, being a product of the law of cause and effect, necessarily cannot have a first, causeless, moment.

Fifth, from the Mahayana point of view our mind-stream is also endless—as opposed to the Hinayana view, which says that it ceases at the end of the life in which the person achieves their own liberation, *pratimoksha*, *nirvana*: cessation of suffering and its causes.

And sixth, mind has far subtler, more refined, levels of cognition than are posited as even existing in the materialist models. In order to accomplish Buddhahood—to rid our mind utterly of all delusions and their imprints and to develop to perfection all goodness—we need to access the subtlest level of our mind, the clear light consciousness, by using tantric meditation techniques.

Three Categories of the States of the Mind

The Buddhist model of the mind has its origins, of course—as His Holiness the Dalai Lama often points out—in the marvelous experiential findings of the great Indian thinkers and yogis: it was they who began the extraordinary investigation into the nature of self. The literature studied in depth in the Tibetan monastic universities up to the present day encompasses the epistemological and psychological models explained by these great masters.

Mental consciousness—as opposed to sensory—has three categories of mental factors, or states of mind: negative, positive, and neutral. These are technical, not moralistic, terms. The negative states, such as attachment, anger, jealousy, and pride, are necessarily disturbing, as well as delusional—literally, misconceptions—and, when they're the motivating force behind actions of body and speech, are the causes of suffering.

The positive states, such as love, compassion, and generosity, are necessarily not disturbing and not delusional—relatively, at least—and, when they're the motivating force behind actions of body and speech, are the causes of happiness.

The neutral states—that is, those that are

neither negative nor positive—such as concentration, mindfulness, and alertness, are involved in both positive and negative actions. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche often points out, even ‘thieves need mindfulness’.

The root misconception, ignorance—Tibetan *ma-rig-pa*, unawareness—also referred to as self-grasping, underpins all the other states of mind, including the positive. Until this is uprooted—with the realisation of emptiness, *shunyata*, the utter lack of the intrinsic self that ignorance believes in—samsara never ends, and certainly Buddhahood can never be achieved.

Nevertheless, according to Lord Buddha’s four noble truths the main cause of suffering in the desire realm—which encompasses gods, humans, animals, spirits, and hell beings—is desire, attachment. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says in *How to Enjoy Death*: ‘[Attachment] is what ties us to samsara continuously, has been tying us to samsara continuously, and will continue to tie us to samsara, because our consciousness has existed since beginningless time and will continue to exist forever. Until we have cut the causes of samsara, body after body will keep coming, like the assembly line in a car factory.’¹

The Qualified Yogi or Yogini

It is not a cliché to say that Lord Buddha is a psychologist, that his expertise is the mind, and that Buddhist tantra is the most sophisticated psychology of all. The unique skill of the tantric yogis and yoginis is their ability to utilise the energy generated by the delusions, in particular attachment, as a tool for achieving enlightenment. This is the essence of the psychology of tantra.

As Lama Thubten Yeshe says in *The Bliss of Inner Fire*,

According to Lord Buddha’s general teachings, known as Sutrayana, desire is the cause of human beings’ problems, so it must be avoided.

According to Tantrayana, however, this very desire can be used in the path to enlightenment. ... tantric practitioners use the energy of their own pleasure as a resource and, in the deep concentration of *samadhi* meditation, unify it with the wisdom that realizes emptiness. Eventually this gives rise to simultaneously born great blissful wisdom, which in turn leads to enlightenment.²

The Quick Path

Tantrayana is said to be the quick path to Buddhahood. By using the tantric methods, the most qualified, most sublime yogis and yoginis can achieve enlightenment in ‘one brief lifetime of this degenerate time’, as Lama Zopa Rinpoche puts it in *How to Enjoy Death*. Using only the Paramitayana methods, the meditator would take three countless great eons to achieve the goal.

This gets us very excited! In response to a question at a public teaching in Los Angeles years ago about the quickest way to get enlightened,

Lama Zopa Rinpoche





Vajradhara Buddha

I recall that His Holiness the Dalai Lama cried: ‘I don’t want to know about quick, fastest,’ he said sadly. ‘Look at Milarepa!’—the eleventh-century tantric yogi beloved by Tibetans. There he was, with ‘callouses on his arse,’ never giving up working to become a buddha *only* for suffering sentient beings.

These great practitioners want desperately to become enlightened as quickly as possible because the suffering of sentient beings is unbearable, but they would happily spend eons in hell if it would benefit just one of them.

Buddhist Practice is Gradual

Tantra might be the most advanced level of

practice and the quickest way to Buddhahood, but it needs a sound basis in supporting practices. In the system of practice of the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, the stages of the path to enlightenment, Tibetan, *lam-rim*, all the teachings and practices that lead to Buddhahood are presented gradually, from the easiest to the most difficult, like in any good education system, starting with the Hinayana and leading to the Mahayana, which includes Paramitayana and Tantrayana, also referred to as Vajrayana or Mantrayana.

Another way of framing these teachings is as the three principal aspects of the path: renunciation, *bodhichitta*, and insight into emptiness.

As the fourteenth century Gelug founder Tsong Khapa says in his *Hymns of Experience*, 'Success in your practice of Paramitayana qualifies you to practice Tantrayana; Success in your practice of Tantrayana is the result of having mastered Paramitayana. Renunciation, bodhichitta and the correct view of emptiness, the three principal aspects of Lord Buddha's teachings, are stages shared by both Mahayana vehicles.'³

A heartfelt appreciation of these three entitles the devoted practitioners to receive the appropriate initiations from their guru, empowering them to practice. But the only person who actually gets results is the one who has genuine realisations of them. Who else could possibly utilise the energy of desire, the very cause of this body, this desire realm, this samsara?

Even the accomplishment of the first of the three, renunciation, is astonishing. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche often says in his teachings: we have achieved renunciation when 'just the thought of another moment of attachment is so disgusting it's like being in a septic tank'. With this renunciation the meditator has the power to cut the belief in the intrinsic self, thus realising emptiness, and, moved by infinite compassion for sentient beings, engage in the 'highly technical, internally technical' practices of tantra, as Lama Yeshe refers to them in *The Bliss of Inner Fire*.⁴

Four Classes of Tantra

The explanations of the practices of the four classes of tantra in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition have their source in the *Kangyur*, the canonical teachings of the Buddha, twenty-six of the one hundred and four volumes dealing with the topic.

There are the three lower tantras, action, performance, and yoga; and highest yoga. In general, the main practices in the Tibetan tradition

are from the action and highest yoga classes.

In each class the practitioner is capable of taking into the path different levels of attachment. As Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche explains in *Principles of Buddhist Tantra*, 'disciples of the three lower tantras take as their path the attachment that focuses on the five [sense] objects visualized as goddesses in front of themselves. ... In highest yoga tantra, disciples take as their path the attachment that desires union with a [consort] ... so that they may enhance the [*kundalini*] ... in their body that is the cause of generating strong innate great bliss as the special awareness realizing emptiness.'⁵

Highest yoga is the only class that deals with the energy systems of the body: the seventy-two thousand channels of the subtle nervous system; the subtle winds and various levels of consciousness inextricably connected to these winds that course through the channels; and the subtle red and white drops, or kundalini. The control over these energies is what allows the yogis and yoginis to access the subtlest level of their mind, the clear light mind, and, combining it with great bliss, use it to realise emptiness and eventually achieve enlightenment. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says in *How to Enjoy Death*, 'they are able to open the chakras, causing the winds to enter into and flow in the central channel and dissolve at the heart chakra, and thus meditate in the clear light'.

Preparing the Mind

In the Gelug tradition there are various practices that need to be accomplished to prepare the mind to engage in highest yoga tantra, known as the common and uncommon preliminary practices, Tibetan, *ngon-dro*. They function to purify obstacles caused by the past negative karma of the practitioner and create vast merit, making the mind ripe for realisations.

The common practices include thorough engagement in the earlier stages of the path to enlightenment, the essence of which are renunciation, bodhichitta, and emptiness.

There are nine uncommon preliminary practices. Usually in the context of retreat, the practitioner completes one hundred thousand of each of the nine: Refuge mantras, prostrations, Vajrasattva, one hundred-syllable mantra, mandala offerings, guru yoga recitations, water bowl offerings, Vajra Daka mantras, small bas-relief images of the buddhas—Tibetan, *tsa-tsa*—and Samaya Vajra mantras.

Vows and Commitments

All levels of Buddhist practice come with their own sets of vows and commitments, and practitioners cannot enter the more advanced levels without the earlier ones. There are three sets of vows: *pratimoksha*, bodhisattva, and tantric. A vow is a decision to refrain from something and a commitment is a decision to do something. Vows are said to be subtle physical forms that are visible to clairvoyants.

Entry-level Buddhists formally take refuge in the Three Precious Sublime Ones—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—and commit to various daily practices. Next they take the five layperson's *pratimoksha* vows: to not kill any sentient being, not steal, not lie, not engage in sexual misconduct, and not take intoxicants. There are also the *pratimoksha* vows for men and women who choose the monastic life: two hundred and fifty-two for the men and three hundred and sixty-three for the women.

Now qualified to enter into the bodhisattva path, they will take the eighteen root vows and forty-six secondary vows.

Now qualified to enter into Tantrayana, they can take an empowerment in the first of the two lower tantras. They're also qualified to

take a highest yoga tantra empowerment, during which they receive the four initiations, and with this they take the tantric vows: the fourteen root vows, the nine and eight and three secondary vows; also, if appropriate, the ten vows related to mother tantra. They also agree to the nineteen commitments of the five Buddha families and various other commitments, such as daily recitation of the sadhana of the deity—in tantra, synonymous with Buddha.

Keeping pure *samaya*, one's word of honour, one's pledge, by keeping one's vows and commitments is seen as a prerequisite for any realisations on the path to enlightenment. As Losang Chökyi Gyaltzen, the fourth Panchen Lama, says in a favourite Gelug practice, *Guru Puja*: 'I seek your blessings to complete the perfection of moral discipline, Not transgressing the bounds of the pratimoksha, bodhisattva, and tantric vows even at the cost of my life.'⁶

Guru Devotion: The Heart of the Path

Crucial to the practitioner's success is pure devotion in the guru, the essence of which is seeing her or him as a Buddha. Throughout Tibetan Buddhist literature guru devotion is said to be the root of the path, the basis of all realisations. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche advised a disciple in answer to his question in a letter: 'Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo, the great enlightened being, the actual Heruka, said that if one is able to stop all thought of faults and look only at the good qualities, seeing the guru only a buddha, one can achieve enlightenment in this life. ... with the realization that sees all buddhas as the guru and all gurus as the buddha, one can. This is said in both sutra and tantra and in all four Tibetan Mahayana traditions.'⁷

How to find a qualified guru? Lama Zopa Rinpoche, in the same communication, advised the following:



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[The Ten Qualities of a Mahayana Guru]

1. Discipline as a result of his mastery of the training in the higher discipline of moral self-control;
2. Mental quiescence [samadhi] from his training in higher concentration;
3. Pacification of all delusions and obstacles from his training in higher wisdom [insight into emptiness];
4. More knowledge than his disciple in the subject to be taught;
5. Enthusiastic perseverance and joy in teaching;
6. A treasury of scriptural knowledge;
7. Insight into and understanding of emptiness;
8. Skill in presenting the teachings;
9. Great compassion; and
10. No reluctance to teach and work for his disciples regardless of their level of intelligence.

Even if one doesn't have all the ten qualities but has five, six, or seven qualities, the main quality is having more knowledge than the disciple and having great compassion.

[The Ten Qualities of a Tantric Guru]

A tantric master must have even more good qualities. Most important is that he be an extremely stable person, with his body, speech, and mind totally under control. He should be someone in whose presence everyone feels calm, peaceful, and relaxed and even the mere sight of him brings great pleasure to the mind. And his compassion must be unsurpassable.

There are two sets of ten fields in which the vajra guru must be a complete master. The ten inner ones are essential for teaching the yoga and ... [highest yoga] classes of tantra, which stress the importance of purifying mainly internal mental activities. These are expertise in:

1. Visualizing wheels of protection and eliminating obstacles;
2. Preparing and consecrating protection knots and amulets to be worn around the neck;
3. Conferring the vase and secret initiations, planting the seeds for attaining a Buddha's Form Bodies;
4. Conferring the wisdom and word initiations, planting the seeds for attaining a Buddha's Wisdom Bodies;

5. Separating the enemies of Dharma from their own protectors;

6. Making the offerings, such as of sculptured tormas;

7. Reciting mantras, both verbally and mentally, that is, visualizing them revolving around his heart;

8. Performing wrathful ritual procedures for forcefully catching the attention of the meditational deities and protectors;

9. Consecrating images and statues; and

10. Making mandala offerings, performing the meditational practices (*sadhana*) and taking self-initiations.

The ten external qualities are required for teaching the ... [action] and ... [performance] classes of tantra, which stress the importance of purifying mainly external activities in connection with internal mental processes.

These are expertise in:

1. Drawing, constructing and visualizing the mandala abodes of the meditational deities;

2. Maintaining the different states of single-minded concentration;

3. Executing the hand gestures (*mudras*);

4. Performing the ritual dances;

5. Sitting in the full meditation position;

6. Reciting what is appropriate to these two classes of tantra;

7. Making fire offerings;

8. Making the various other offerings;

9. Performing the rituals of:

a) Pacification of disputes, famine, and disease,

b) Increase of life span, knowledge, and wealth,

c) Power to influence others, and

d) Wrathful elimination of demonic forces and interferences; and

10. Invoking meditational deities and dissolving them back into their appropriate places.

Lama Tsong Khapa explained that in degenerated times it is difficult to find ... [gurus] having all these qualities mentioned above, so if the ... [guru] does not have all those qualities then having two, five, or even eight is sufficient.

... the minimum qualities the guru should have ... [are] having the lineage of the initiation (that he is giving), living according to samaya vows and tantric vows, and that the deities have not prohibited him from offering the initiation by, for example, giving signs, etc.⁸

Having found such a guru, the meditators cultivate devotion and develop pure view in their practice of guru yoga: the seeing of the guru and the Buddha as inseparable.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche further advised:

Since you have received highest tantra initiation from ... [Rinpoche], this means he is your guru. Any time that you take a teaching with the recognition that you are the disciple and the teacher is the guru, then even if the teacher only says a few words, a verse of teachings, or one mantra recitation, that person is your guru from then on and there is no change. After one makes that Dharma connection of guru and disciple, then if you give up it is the heaviest negative karma, the greatest obstacle to your spiritual growth. It brings heavy obstacles and one has to experience, especially at the time of death, eons of suffering in the lower realms and hell realms.

According to the texts, the teachings of the Buddha, the lam-rim, one is supposed to think only of the qualities of the guru and only praise them. The heaviest negative karma is if anger and heresy arise, and you criticize him or her.

It is said in many tantric teachings—the Kalachakra and Guhyasamaja—that even if one has accumulated the five uninterrupted negative karmas, one can still achieve the sublime

vehicle in this life, in particular the ... [highest yoga tantra] path. This path has the most skills to grant enlightenment in a brief lifetime of these degenerate times. But if you criticize the guru from the heart, even if you practice the sublime vehicle, you will not achieve this.

In the Lama Tsong Khapa lam-rim it is clearly mentioned that even the thought that the virtuous friend is ordinary becomes a cause to lose realizations, which means that it also becomes an obstacle to developing the mind on the path.

The most important thing is to analyze as much as possible before making Dharma contact. When the recognition of guru and disciple is present, since the Dharma contact is established, then from that time there is no change. One has to have a new relationship with the guru, it is another world, looking at that person with a new and pure mind.

The Four Initiations

In order to practise highest yoga tantra, the practitioner receives the four initiations from the guru in relation to a particular deity.

The vase initiation purifies the negative karma created by the body, entitles the practitioner to meditate on the generation stage, and creates the cause to achieve the *nirmanakaya*, the emanation body of a Buddha.

The secret initiation purifies the negative karma created by the speech, entitles the practitioner to meditate on the impure and pure illusory body, and creates the cause to achieve the *sambhogakaya*, the enjoyment body of a Buddha.

The wisdom initiation purifies the negative karma created by the mind, entitles the practitioner to meditate on the clear light, and creates the cause to achieve the *dharmakaya*, the truth body of a Buddha.

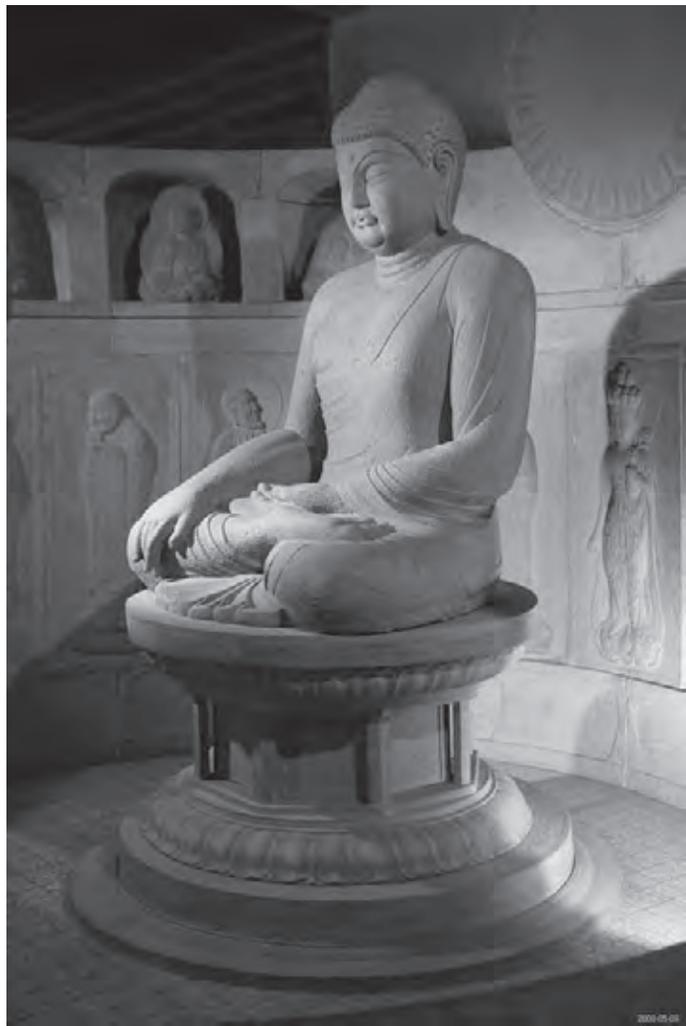
The word initiation purifies the general subtle stains of the body, speech, and mind, in

particular subtle dual view, entitles the practitioner to meditate on the path of unification, and creates the cause to achieve the unified state of Vajradhara, the tantric aspect of Buddha, Buddhahood.

Achieving the Bodies of a Buddha

Having received the four initiations, the yogi or yogini practises seeing themselves as the deity in the context of the mandala of that deity.

After achieving some stability in their meditation they can train in using the three experiences of sleep, dream, and waking up as preparation for the experiences of death, intermediate state, and rebirth in order, finally, to transform death into the *dharmakaya*, the intermediate, into the *sambhogakaya*, and rebirth into the *nirmanakaya*.



In Tantrayana, it is explained that the gradual deconstruction of the person from the gross, to the subtle, to the extremely subtle levels of physicality, and the associated levels of gross, subtle, and extremely subtle consciousness that occurs during the dying process, as well as the gradual reconstruction of the person from extremely subtle, to the subtle, to the gross that occurs during the intermediate state and rebirth, are more powerful experiences of the same process that occurs every time we go to sleep, dream, and wake up. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says in *How to Enjoy Death*:

Death is what [the yogis] have been waiting for. At the point in the death process when all the grosser consciousnesses have ceased and only the extremely subtle consciousness is left, the yogis—those who have observed karma well, kept their precepts purely, spent their lives

training their minds in the clear light meditation and have been able to recognize the base-time clear light, the imagined, visualized one—are now able to recognize the clear light of death. They can remain in meditation in the clear light conjoined with emptiness for as long as they wish—one hour, three days, many months; some meditators stay in the clear light meditation in their hermitage for years.

The Purpose of a Consort

The most qualified yogis and yoginis do not need to wait until death to access their extremely subtle consciousness in order to become enlightened. Already in their meditations they have trained in their visualisations of themselves as the deity in union with a consort. The special bliss that is generated in their mind is powerful enough to induce the subtler levels of consciousness that are necessary to realise emptiness.

As Lama Yeshe says in *The Bliss of Inner Fire*: [Having] perfectly learned the three stages of entering, stabilizing, and absorbing the winds; and, through familiarity with this practice and the power of the absorption of the winds, they have developed complete control over the flow of kundalini and thus experienced simultaneously born bliss. In order to increase the experience of the four joys, the yogi or yogini can then practice with a consort ... when the heart chakra opens and the kundalini flows. ... they should not practice with a consort until they have opened the tightness of the knots of the heart chakra.

Why is a consort necessary? At this point, the airs have already entered the central channel, stabilized, and absorbed. The four elements have ceased and the yogi or yogini has seen all the visions. With the flowing of the kundalini energy, they have experienced the four joys, culminating in the experience of simultaneously born bliss, and with that bliss they have comprehended non-duality. In other words, they have gone beyond grasping. Since they have already experienced simultaneously born great blissful wisdom, why



do they need to practice with a consort?

The point is that there are degrees of these experiences: degrees of air absorption, degrees of bliss, and degrees of realization of nonduality. Practice with a consort causes the airs to enter the central channel more strongly; and the more strongly the airs enter, the more strongly they will stabilize and absorb, and the more bliss will be generated. The purpose of practicing with a consort is to increase these experiences, and eventually to energize total absorption of the winds at the heart chakra, total bliss, and total realization of nonduality. Up to this point, the yogi or yogini has used a mental consort in meditation and has only begun to open the heart chakra. They need the help of a daka or dakini to totally open it. To energize the complete experience of great bliss, the male and female must help each other to bring the embracing energy into the central channel.

There is a lot of confusion about consort practice, so you should understand clearly what Buddhist tantra has to say about it. The completion stage experience of great bliss achieved with a consort is incredible. It is beyond expression, beyond all concepts, beyond words. Accepting a consort is the unsurpassed way to achieve enlightenment. In fact, having reached the point of being qualified to take a consort, a yogi or yogini will definitely become enlightened in that life; they will achieve Vajradhara hood.

It is also explained that both the male and female practitioners should be qualified to practice and should be of equal good fortune and intelligence. When the male and female partners are equally qualified, they both experience the absorptions.

Je Pabongka also explains that the consort should be shown to you by your deity, your ... [guru], or the dakinis. Of the four types of consorts, he considers the best to be the mantra-born consort, which means someone who has become qualified through their practice of tantra.⁹

Lama Tsong Khapa also explains this in

Having the Three Convictions. The actual consort is merely a tool rarely used for the greatest practitioner.

Lama Yeshe continues: 'for yogis and yoginis who have reached a certain level of development, it is enough for them to have the experience with a consort just once. Merely by remembering their previous experience with a relative consort, they will go effortlessly into deep samadhi and experience perfectly all the absorptions. In the terminology of tantra, emptiness is the absolute consort, and finally that is enough' (167).

Prayer of Dedication

Because of the past, present, and future merit
Created by me and by the buddhas and sentient
beings,
May all sentient beings be able to actualise completely
in this very lifetime
Lama Tsong Khapa's path of unified sutra and
tantra, which is pure like refined gold.
May this pure teaching of Lama Tsong Khapa
Spread in all directions and flourish forever. 

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