

## Secret Instructions for Transformation: The Subtle Body of Kundalini Yoga

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In most Tantric practice, there is an assumption of an extensive knowledge of the Forceful Unification (Hatha Yoga) subtle body-system and its processes. Unfortunately, Hatha Yoga in the West has become an exercise program, often with great attention to the physical activity and, in many cases, almost none to the primary mental concentrations. Yet in Tantric Buddhism, it is the mental aspects of Hatha Yoga that are emphasized. The form of yogic practice in Tantric Buddhism is very closely related to Coiled (Serpent-Arising) Unification (Kundalini Yoga), which is also found in Tantric Hindu practices.

The notion of an inner spiritual self and the ability to awaken latent powers and energies within the individual is of great antiquity in Indic thought. Presentations of what appear to be yogic meditators are depicted on Indus Valley Civilization seals, dating from approximately 2000 B.C.E. Further, the assumption of yoga as controlling the subtle body of the practitioner is found in the earliest of the *Upanishads*, and continues to the present day as one of the precepts of all Indic religions. In the 2nd century B.C.E., the Sanskrit grammarian and philosopher Patanjali, wrote the Yoga sutras, which explain the principles in terse but precise detail.

By the experience of practitioners who have succeeded in awakening these primordial energies, the yogic powers are fearsome indeed, seeming to have independent wills and able to redirect the psyche in radically new and different directions. The Buddhist guru must prepare his disciples to both arouse these forces and control them.

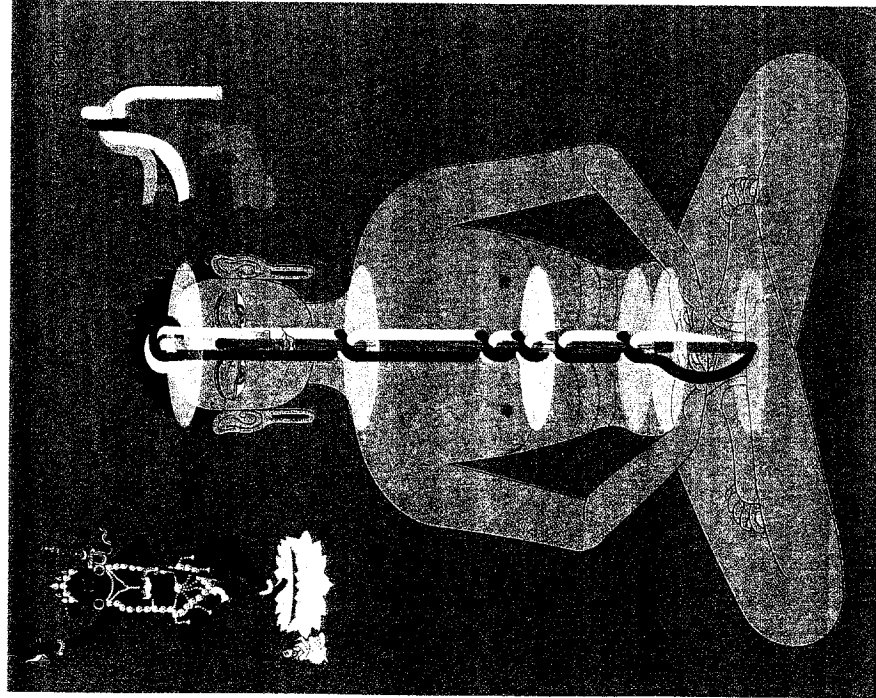


Fig. 1. Diagram of the subtle body.

The practices of the Highest Yoga Tantras divide the transformative practices into two parts: generation- and completion-stage practices. Although specific details of the visualization differ, the generation stage consists of visualizing and generating the deity and understanding the self as the body of the deity. In this stage, the yogic meditations are simply visualized, rather than actually experienced. The completion meditations consist of the transformative meditations of the subtle body, which involve the winds (*prana*), channels (*nadi*), energy centers (*chakra*), and drops (*bindu*). In the Buddhist transformative meditation, there is a profound relationship between the subtle body transformations and the stages of death, the intermediate stage (*barādo*) and rebirth that must be understood.

The presumption of the “subtle-body- [structure]” (*sukshma sharira*) underlies the notion of yogic transformation. By means of recalled visualizations (*smriti*), breath control (*pranayama*), symbols or seals (*mudra*), vows (*samaya*), restraints (*bandha*), and recitations (*bija*, *mantra*, and *dharani*), the subtle-body is prepared for purified awakening. Our coarse physical body is made up of the six constituents: earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness. On the other hand, the subtle body (Fig. 1) consists of 72,000 channels (*nadi*), of which three, running vertically from the crown of the head to the tip of the sexual organ, are paramount. These three channels, consisting of left, right, and central channels, are the main conduits for the energy winds, winds that cause all movement by and within the body. Two originate at the nostrils, *lalana* on the left and *rasana* on the right, corresponding to the wisdom/red and skillful means/white duality of the Tantric Buddhist symbolism. These channels entwine the central *nadi* and descend to the base chakra. From there, the central channel ascends through the axial center of the body, finally emerging through the top of the head. Along the central *nadi*, usually at crossing points of the lateral channels, are centers. At these centers are focused the various energies of the particular meditational system and, entirely depending on the specific text, there may be anywhere from a single chakra to as many as thirteen. More commonly there are four, five, six, or seven. Also, entirely dependant on the specific text, there are additional *nadis* radiating out from each of the chakras. It is through these minor *nadis* that the vital breath (*prana*) circulates to the extremities.

At each of the chakras, there are constrictions to the progress of the vital breath, as the outer channels wind around the central *nadi*. Likened to knots, they are the result of negative factors, hindrances, egoisms, and the like. Indeed, the Tibetans call them the “six circled-knots” (*du druk kor*). To unknot them requires great concentration, intense visualizations, and a peaceful, purified state of mind. Then, the consciousness can direct the breath into the base chakra of the central *nadi*, where it awakens Coiled Female Energy (*kundalini shakti*), who lies latent in the form of a serpent coiled around the primordial energizer. The play on words of *kunda*, “vase-of-abundance,” and *kundalin*, “(hoop) earring,” are implied, thus she is energy, abundance, and adorned (with the treasures of attainment).

Initially, via the nostrils, the *prana* flows into one or the other of the lateral *nadis*, descends to the basal chakra, and strikes the primordial

energizer to awaken the coiled serpent-energy (*kundalini*), also known in Buddhist Yogini Tantras as Chandali, “Goddess of Inner Heat.”<sup>21</sup> Frequently in the Yogini Tantras, the specific female aspect, for example Vajravahini in the case of the *Chakrasamvara Tantra*, is the manifestation of the inner heat and is abiding at the navel chakra. As the transformative agent in this process, Chandali herself represents the wisdom fire (*prajna anala*). Since her name derives from the caste of crematory workers (*chandala*), it is understood that she is the purifying fire of the cremation and, as a member of an impure caste, she is the perfect embodiment of the Tantric vehicle of attainment. Through the energy of the inner heat the practitioner experiences the bliss of attainment.

From the base chakra, the awakened energy or heat moves up the central channel to the next chakra and so on, depending on the specific system, and emerges through the opening at the top of the head, at which point the yogin experiences the bliss of complete awakening.<sup>22</sup> Rising through the chakras, the consciousness becomes less and less focused on egoistic desires and cravings and increasingly concentrated on higher awareness. It must be noted that even the path taken by that energy or heat is subject to variation. As will be seen in the meditation of Chakrasamvara/Vajravahini, the chakras are specific to this cycle of the Mother (*yogini*) Tantras. These chakras are also related to the elements of fire, earth, wind, and water that make up the physical body.

While the transformative system is significant in both Tantric Hindu and Buddhist methodologies, the symbolism is distinctive in the two traditions. In the Buddhist context, one of the fundamental yogic practices is to create the adamantine body (*vajra kaya* or *vajra delha*) through the concentration on the channels (*nadi*), vital breaths (*prana*), and the red and white fluids, known as drops (*bindu*), which are the pure essence of seminal fluid and menstrual blood. By generating the adamantine body, the yogin is to understand his or her physical body as the mandala palace and the deities of the mandala are the channels and the red and white drops. These drops are the foundational will to enlightenment (*bodhicitta*), which when united become the realized *bodhicitta* that leads to enlightenment. Once the yogin has visualized the adamantine body, in the completion-stage practices, he or she activates the chakras through the vital winds, awakening the energies within, and experiences the transformative attainment.

One of the preliminary meditations is on the five elements (*bhuta*), in which the elements are represented as colored geometric forms (Fig. 2), each with a connection to one of the Jina Buddhas. The earth chakra is the basal chakra, the water chakra is the abdominal chakra, the fire chakra is the heart chakra, and the wind chakra is in the throat. Space is the thousand-petaled lotus chakra at the top of the head, which, in turn, supports the moon-sun-*bindu* symbol of transcendent attainment. As will be seen in the meditation, the *bindu* is the emergent energy of transcendence and attainment. Each of these elements is associated with a variety of characteristics, a *bija* “seed (syllable),” color, direction, shape, one of the Jina Buddhas, and so on (see essay, Enlightenment, Fig. 2, Jina Buddhas chart).

As part of the Tantric Buddhist yogic methodology, the experiences of death, intermediate stage, and rebirth are visualized during the transformative meditations. In the normal stages of death, the coarse elements of the body gradually dissolve, as the mind and the life-breath

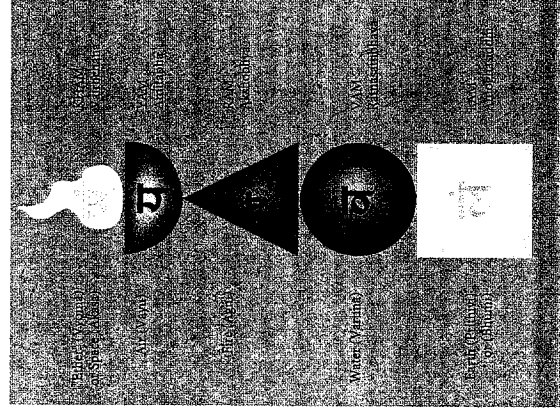


Fig. 2. Diagram of the elements.

(*prana*) that supports it progressively withdraw. The senses and sense organs, the five aggregates, the five wisdoms, and the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and consciousness gradually dissolve, accompanied by an external sign of the weakening of the internal elements. The body of the dying person becomes heavy, the fluids of the body dry up, the body begins to lose its warmth, and then ceases to breathe altogether. As the coarse levels of mind cease to function, increasingly subtle levels of energy wind support the mind.<sup>23</sup> Then, the three subtlest levels of the conceptual mind cease to function according to their level of coarseness. The dying person sees a radiant white light, caused by the falling of the white male *bodhicitta* from crown chakra. When this dissolves, there appears a radiant red light, caused by the red *bindu* received from the mother ascending from the navel chakra. Finally, the luminous red gives way to the black near-attainment, a great darkness caused by the joining of the white and red drops with the indestructible *bindu* at the heart *chakra*, where the winds finally come to rest. Finally, the mind is based only on the subtlest level of energy mind, where the mind of clear light manifests.

In the natural course of death this process happens involuntarily, so the experience of the clear light of death cannot be controlled or properly utilized to realize emptiness. Soon, the stages of dissolution begin to reverse themselves as the dying person prepares to enter the intermediate state (*barado*), the post-death plane of existence wherein one's consciousness wanders as a “*barado-being*” for a period of seven to forty-nine days before taking rebirth. The appearances of black near-attainment and radiant red light increase, and clear white radiance returns, followed by the increasingly coarser states that signal entry into the intermediate state. Finally, this *barado-being* enters a womb and takes rebirth once more in the realm of *samsara*, the phenomenal mundane world. Through such intense practice of transformation yogic meditation, the Tantric Buddhist practitioner in this way utilizes the subtle body to realize the state of emptiness (*shunyata*) and experience the supreme bliss of the enlightened state.

In the Tantric Buddhist system, it is through the symbolism of duality, such as male/female, wisdom/compassion, red/white and so on, that the ultimate nonduality of reality is explained. While the notion of “neither positivism nor negativism” is of remote antiquity in Indic religions, in Tantra it is explained through the metaphor of sexual symbolism. For example, the male yogin represents the phenomenal world, in contrast to the female yogini who represents the noumenal world (see Perfection of Wisdom Essay, Fig. 2). In meditations, the male stage is the generation stage and the female the completion stage. Both halves of the meditation must be achieved by the same practitioner to be effective, and once fully realized, the male and female become nondual and, much like a positron and an electron when they collide, annihilate each other's state and expand forever throughout the totality of space. Thus, the union of male and female serves as a perfect metaphor to symbolize the nondual state of Shunyata.

1 David Snellgrove, *Hewajra Tantra*, pt. 1., 36–37.

2 There are various descriptions of the progress of Kundalini along the central *nadi*, ranging from a slow, laborious, almost trudging ascent to a swift, lightening-like leap. Apparently, the experience is very different for each individual.

3 Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, and Alexander Berzin, *The Gelug/Kagyu Tradition of Mahamudra*, 197–98.