

2 Retreat In Review:

The Vajrasattva Sadhana: 8-14 May 2020

THIS COMMENTARY TO THE VAJRASATTVA SADHANA was given on an online Order retreat in May 2020 and revised for this text. All of it, including any errors, comes from my attempts at practising the sadhana and bringing to life its underlying view of reality. Corrections and constructive suggestions are welcome.

The retreat came about in London during the height of the first Covid lockdown, with fear on the streets and ambulance sirens blaring. Yashobodhi and I were living in a small flat in West Hampstead. It was our second event. We made the surprising discovery that it is possible to have a rich experience of community through an online medium. It was a joy to celebrate the values we share as Order members, and Vajrasattva's special qualities lifted the oppressiveness of that era.

Vajrasattva was the practice I was given at ordination in 1974. It was Sangharakshita's choice for me and is the sadhana I have practised most. The figure expresses our unrealised Buddha nature, and the sadhana focuses on purification. These elements in the practice draw attention to inner obstacles that need to be faced and purified.

The teachings on the retreat ranged from an introduction to the significance and form of the symbolic figure of Vajrasattva through an introduction to the vajra body, to detailed instruction on the stages of practising the sadhana. We had some excellent discussion on issues arising from individuals' meditation.

We practised mainly the Vajrasattva sadhana found in the Tharpe Delam and in the current set of Triratna Mula Yogas. We also chanted a puja I had written based on the sadhana (included at the end of this document) and, to a drumbeat, many, many Vajrasattva mantras – both hundred-syllable and six-syllable versions.

Kamalashila, Somerleyton, July 2023

What follows consists of these sections:

- The Vajrasattva sadhana text
- A general introduction to Vajrasattva
- The Vajrasattva sadhana in detail
- A Vajrasattva puja

First, the Vajrasattva sadhana text extracted from the Tharpe Delam:

The Meditation of Vajrasattva

[One should say and think]:

On the crown of one's ordinary human body is the effulgent body of Vajrasattva, the Embodiment of the Five Buddhas, White, shining, with dorje and bell, wearing ornaments, cross-legged, smiling, with compassionate expression, with HUM in the centre of the heart, surrounded by the circle of letters, from [both of] which issues milk-like nectar [that penetrates] from the crown of one's head to the sole of one's feet, whereupon disease, evil spirits, sin, eclipse [of good in the heart] are destroyed.

Like a crystal vase filled with curds, like clear and void light [one's body becomes].

OM VAJRASATTVA etc.

One should repeat [this mantra] many times.

One should [then] think that in the sky there is a mass of white lotuses edge to edge, on the petals of each of which sits Vajrasattva with HUM in the centre of the heart etc. Beneath each Vajrasattva is a man. From the mantra [surrounding the HUM] light issues and falls upon the head of each man and takes away his sin so that he becomes like a crystal vase filled with curds.

Thus should one think. When these [practices] are finished [one should repeat] the prayer:

Vajrasattva Mahasattva,
All-knowing Vajra
Vajra [the] Primeval Samantabhadra
To [thee] Vajrasattva, I bow!

[Then] repeat this prayer of four lines:

O Protector Vajrasattva, Ignorant and stupid am I;
From your Samaya I have fallen away.
Guru, Protector, Refuge, Supreme Vajra-holder,
The Essence of Great Compassion,
To [thee] the Best of Bipeds, I bow!

Thus one's own and others' sins are purified.

From Vajrasattva's mouth: 'My son, from today your sins and those of all other people are wiped out.'

[one should say and reflect:]

By the light from Vajrasattva's body one's own and other's sins are purified. Become Vajrasattva, each is absorbed in the body of the Guru on the head. Transformed into light, they are united into one.

He is dissolved into the Void.

One should do this 100,000 times. For the purpose of [abbreviated] daily practice one should simply recite the mantra and say and think: Vajrasattva, transformed into light, is absorbed into one's own body.' So much will suffice.

Extracted from the Tharpe Delam or 'Smooth Path to Emancipation'. Rendered into English by Ven. Sthavira Sangharakshita according to the oral explanation of Ven. Dhardo Rimpoche.

A general introduction to Vajrasattva

Vajrasattva is one of the main sadhanas in the Triratna tradition. It was one of the practices in a text Sangharakshita discovered in the 1950s whilst browsing in the Kalimpong bazaar: the Tharpe Delam, a Nyingma manual of the Mula Yogas, the foundation practices of that school. He took those practices up personally, studying the text with Dhardo Rinpoche.

Vajrasattva can be practised as a sadhana separately from the Mula Yogas. That is how it was introduced when I was initiated into the practice at my ordination in November 1974.

As a Mula Yoga, it is central in the series of five, after the Going for Refuge and Bodhicitta practice, and before the Mandala Offering and Guru Yoga. The Mula Yoga practices echo the stages of the Sevenfold Puja, in which one (1) goes for refuge, (2) generates the Bodhicitta, (3) does confession after reaffirming one's practice, (4) rejoices in and offers the good fortune of all beings to the Buddhas and (5) requests the teaching before receiving it.

The whole series also expresses the mandala arising from the blessing of the whole line of realised practitioners, dispensed by Vairocana's wheel-turning mudra at its heart. Mandala presentations indicate a living totality, an energetic force in the universe. In this one, the energy of going for refuge to the Dharma is represented in Aksobhya's quarter of the mandala, associated with the quality of integration. In Ratnasambhava's quarter (positive emotion) the energy is abundant, generous Bodhicitta. Amitabha's quarter (spiritual death) radiates the energy of insight and breakthrough with the Vajrasattva practice. Amoghasiddhi's quarter (spiritual rebirth) is about the energy of post insight as expressed through the Mandala Offering.

In the Mandala Vajrasattva is regarded as a sixth Buddha who embodies the essence of the five wisdoms. Seen in terms of this mandala, the Vajrasattva Yoga is in the place of breakthrough in the realisation that comes from acknowledging failings. Confession entails insight as we realise we must relinquish a certain view of self. We are facing the fact that that kind of view is untenable, that it does not really exist as something solid and is therefore not worth clinging to.

The Image of Vajrasattva

First, a brief summary of the sadhana. Vajrasattva, as the embodiment of the Five Buddhas, appears above, *White, shining, with dorje and bell, wearing ornaments, cross-legged, smiling with compassionate expression, with Hum in the centre of the heart.*

The seed syllable *Hum* is *Surrounded by the circle of letters, from which issues milk-like nectar penetrating from the crown of one's head to the soles of one's feet, whereupon disease, evil spirits, sin, and eclipse of good in the heart are destroyed. Like a crystal vase filled with curds, like clear and void light one's body becomes.* One then repeats the mantra. As that continues the entire sky fills edge to edge with Vajrasattvas, all purifying beings below them. You bow to Vajrasattva and confess that you have fallen away from his Samaya. Vajrasattva assures you that all shortcomings are wiped out and indeed are essentially non-existent. You rise up and become Vajrasattva. All beings then also rise up and become Vajrasattva. All the Vajrasattvas are then absorbed into one.

History

The image of Vajrasattva emerged out of a long phase of Buddhist iconography. In the earliest period the Buddha is not depicted at all, out of respect; surviving sculpture indicates his presence by a pair of footprints or an umbrella. With these, sometimes two attendant Bodhisattvas are portrayed: Padmapani, an early form of Avalokitesvara who holds a lotus, and Vajrapani. Vajrapani holds the vajra, and in this he prefigures the later form of Vajrasattva. In the Pali canon Vajrapani is a yaksha, a powerful nature spirit who protects the Buddha's teaching or, perhaps, expresses its natural power. When the Buddha challenges a false view Vajrapani suddenly manifests from above, threatening those who hum and haw: tell the truth right now or have your head split in two! Vajrapani appears as a Bodhisattva in the Mahayana period, holding a vajra, but it was with the emergence of the Vajrayana that he became prominent as a wrathful Bodhisattva, for example in the Hevajra Tantra.

Vajrasattva arose as a central figure within what can be described as a renaissance of Buddhist practice from the 6th century, in which the vast view of Mahayana became concentrated into a more embodied kind of practice known as the Vajrayana, the way of the vajra. Its spirit was expressed symbolically in what he holds, i.e. the vajra ritual implement, and in lived experience as his pure colour and unclothed appearance. It is the 'natural state,' the uncontrived, non-artificial way of being that manifests when all obstacles to enlightenment are removed.

What Vajrasattva represents

The implement that Vajrasattva holds to his heart in his right hand, the vajra (Tibetan *rDo-rje*), i.e. the 'lord of stones,' thunderbolt and diamond combined, is

irresistibly powerful and unbreakable. It is symbolic of the Vajrayana approach in which enlightenment must be realised in this life itself, in this very body. Each of us possesses an innate potential for that realisation: our vajra-being or Vajrasattvahood. That living potential is what is unbreakable and irresistible, along with our lineal connection with those who have fully realised it. Like our birth-right, neither our vajra nature or our connection to the Buddhas can be removed, and they are always available if we seek them.

The sphere of Vajrasattva is achieved through ritual, mantra, meditation and a kind of mindfulness called Mahamudra which is essentially the teaching of emptiness applied to daily life. In an inspired, visionary way, the realisation of Vajrasattvahood is evoked in this quotation from the Guhyasamaja Tantra:

Then the Lord Buddha, Vajra Thought of Enlightenment, relapsed into that state of composure known as Vajra Pacification of All Buddhas, and immediately [...] the whole realm of space became established in the Vajra nature of All Buddhas, and all living beings throughout the whole realm of space experienced the bliss and the happiness of All Buddhas as a result of their empowerment (adhithana) in Vajra-Being (Vajrasattva)..

Ritual practices that celebrate this realisation use the vajra as an implement. Properly made of meteoric iron, the vajra is designed to channel the electric transforming energy of compassion. It consists of a central sphere with lotuses attached on opposite sides. From the centre of each lotus a shaft protrudes surrounded by four or eight prongs, the effect being like two elongated crowns set either side of a small orb. Held vertically in Vajrasattva's right hand the vajra presents two connected mandalas. Below, the mandala of the five skandhas signifies the state of ordinary samsaric being with awareness as the central shaft surrounded by form, feeling, recognition and volition.* Above, the five Buddhas exemplify its transformation into the awakened state with Vairocana at the centre of the mandala, Aksobhya in the east, Ratnasambhava in the south, Amitabha in the west and Amoghasiddhi in the north.† The overall symbolism of transformation within the double mandala represents the awakened quality of compassion.

The vajra bell in Vajrasattva's left hand symbolises the wisdom aspect. Wisdom is evoked particularly by the Vajrayana approach to mindfulness called Mahamudra. The word means 'the great seal' in the sense of a stamp of authentication, as a monarch might affix her seal to a letter. The practice is characterised by openness and simplicity that reveals innate wisdom. One learns to relax into a state of naturalness through relinquishing the tension of

* *vijnana, rupa, vedana, samjna, samskara*

† The eight pronged vajra represents (inexactly) the eightfold path transforming into the five Buddhas with their Consorts.

habitual reactivity, rather as in the quotation above. The natural and awakened state is viewed as already present, a richness that is already ours but is undiscovered, like a jewel concealed in the fabric of a garment. Though not actualised, it exerts a force in our lives.

In the Buddhist tradition wisdom can arise only when wrong views and kleśas are relinquished, which happens through seeing how their nature is impermanent and empty of self. What is innate is simply our capacity to do this. What is particularly transformative about this Vajrayana approach is its emphasis on the living dynamic or mandala[‡] possessed by this innate capacity. Once its living reality is appreciated it can affect us profoundly. As one unwinds into the uncontrived state of Mahamudra, everything is authenticated with as it were the seal of sunyata, ultimate reality, affixed to it. Everything is reliably a source of wisdom. Nothing is rejected as unsuitable or unworthy for that purpose. Everything can be accepted as equally sunyata, equally empty of solid identity. The practice is to persist in recognising how the living, energetic quality of emptiness or pratityasamutpada, interdependency, pervades and is felt in all experience. Describing our process of transformation, the *Song of Mahamudra* calls it ‘the great vajra yoga of purification,’ showing that it is also the recognition of our true being as Vajrasattva. Vajrasattva had always been our nature. Yet because we had not realised that, we lacked the confidence to persist in the vajra yoga of recognising emptiness in everything.

The lived experience of this continual recognition, which brings freshness to all experience, is what is characterised as the uncontrived natural state. This is why Vajrasattva is often represented as naked. Since long before the Buddha, nudity was an established manner of life for ascetic practitioners, for example Milarepa. Dilgo Kyentse Rinpoche, one of Sangharakshita’s teachers, is often shown in photographs as bare from the waist up in a more socially acceptable reference to this ideal of unpretentious, unadorned being. Vajrayana in general gives emphasis to the body. Indeed body-focused practice goes right back to the Buddha’s teaching of Satipatthana, but in its restatement as Vajrasattvahood the body becomes the main focus for awakening, as our precious means of practice in this life. Another important body-focused exploration in the later tradition, is the subtle inner awareness called the Vajra Body.

The naked image of Vajrasattva and ‘sky clad’ (*digambara*) ascetics remind us that there is nothing inherently shameful about the body. Yet the very idea of nudity can bring up the pride, fear and self-deprecation that is often bound up with our self-image. Such reactions arise from the complex way we identify with the

[‡] Mandala indicates the living totality of causes and effects bodying forth from any central principle, in this case from our innate capacity for realising wisdom (i.e. ‘Buddha nature’).

body. Our 'body image' can become associated with frustrated needs for fulfilment and a complex self-loathing, underlain by a lifetime of embedded views. This is often what we are dealing with when we look into the mirror. The Vajrasattva yoga is a radical way to counter such toxic identifications. By the end of the inner process of purification, we can identify instead as an awakened being, our sense of embodiment transfigured by a realisation of innate wisdom and compassion.

We need to apply the above reflections on the innateness of wisdom, symbolised by the vajra, the vajra-bell and Vajrasattva himself, to his sadhana. The sadhana method can open our hearts to the possibility of insight. It is an extraordinary act of re-imagination allied to the Mahamudra 'relaxation' just described. Recall the fact that imagination is what in the first place creates samsara: our hardened habits of imagination hold us fast in substantialist views and negative self- or body image. Imagination is not reality, yet in its unconscious and semi-conscious forms it permeates our dreams and forms our entire idea of the world. It fuels resentment, paranoia and envy as well as our highest ideals and aspirations. But when we actively engage it, imagination becomes the instrument of our awakening from samsara. Through various approaches in sadhana meditation we imaginatively identify with the chosen deity like an actor in a play. Sometimes, depending on the particular traits of the deity, identification with them is indirect or merely a suggestion. In the case of the Vajrasattva sadhana it is completely explicit: by the final act, you are actually Vajrasattva, and with an understanding that in some sense this no longer play.

Who is Vajrasattva? He is not a deity in the ordinary sense, living on another plane and able to help us by responding to our prayers. Nor however is he simply a personified principle, our vajra nature in the form of a deity who is essentially a projection. He is empty of inherent existence like everything else. Yet there is a sense in which he can be petitioned and has real existence. Awakening, like every other power in the universe – like electricity, human greed or the mystery of embodiment – is by nature impermanent and interdependently arising. It is unowned and does not exist in time or space – as again, like everything. Yet it happens, and its happening affects the universe of interdependently arising events. It is a force in the world arising from the timeless ground of reality, *adhibhumi*, the way everything really exists. It is in this actually inconceivable way that Buddhas exist.

Thus Vajrasattva represents in the sadhana our true nature as vajra, as potentially awakened. He is positioned above us as the overarching influence in our life. He is white which expresses complete purity and perfection, like snow, diamond or crystal. This quality enters our body from above in the form of a

crystalline nectar, the influence of his total purity of being pervading and filling our whole body from the crown down to the soles. This part of the sadhana is like a body-awareness practice in which the awareness provides a channel for purification. Awareness is washing through us, clearing away obstructions, cleansing every part of us from ignorance, clinging and aversion. As the nectar penetrates down the central channel and pervades all the energy centres and all the tiny channels in every part of the body, it brings openness and with that the chance to let go at the basic physical level of our being. Everything becomes able to relax: all the usual grasping and clinging to expectations and preferences, every habitual aversion, expectation and assumption releases as our mind opens to new possibilities and becomes clean, fresh and young again.

So this is what Vajrasattva represents as a yidam and as a sadhana. It is about becoming natural, becoming our true, natural selves beyond contrivance and artificiality.

The point of the sadhana is to make all this real, to realise in an embodied way that this is actually our nature. The whole sadhana, and in particular the long, 100-syllable mantra, is about a process of becoming Vajrasattva. It could be seen as a kind of story, a variant on the classic myth we know from European culture as *nostos* or homecoming after a long separation, like Odysseus' return to Ithaca in the *Odyssey*. Sangharakshita describes this in his lecture, the *Myth of the Return Journey*. We are returning home from what seems like an eternity of separation from our true kind. We have always had as part of us the capacity to become an awakened one, a Buddha, just as an acorn has as its very nature the capacity to grow into a thousand-year oak. But for a long time we have been like an acorn kept on a shelf and never planted. Now we have been finally planted in the soil of Dharma and watered with the blessings of practice, it is inevitable that sooner or later, the roots, branches, leaves and fruits of awakening will flourish and we will attain what was always our birthright, our true home.

The Vajrasattva sadhana in detail

Let us now go through the whole sadhana in a practical, hands-on way. First, some general remarks about how to approach it.

To get into the spirit of it at the start, perform the sadhana as though it were your part in a play. Let deeper more heartfelt engagement come more naturally in its own time, as the practice starts making sense. However just as much as you can, practise in good faith that it will flourish, as it has for innumerable other practitioners down the ages.

Because of Vajrasattva's nature as a purifying agent, it is important actually to feel whatever obstacle seems to be present. Be open for example to there being some awkwardness, sense of unreality, or resistance. Mindfully observe and feel those experiences. Meeting obstructions and purifying them through mindfulness is a key aspect of this sadhana. And it is not an easy emphasis at all. I usually find that when I do Vajrasattva I become aware of difficulties that I hadn't been aware of. This can be the flavour of Vajrasattva's world, at least at the start. Actually the main flavour is an intense joy as we realise we have always been essentially free of all of that, but we cannot bypass our actual experience to get there. So be patient and understand that purification means acknowledging everything that feels wrong, from a minor ache to a dark sense of sinfulness or self-loathing. Or there may be a sense merely of nothingness, i.e. no feeling at all. All of this stresses the unpleasant. The practice may indeed not always be helpful to everyone, so don't do it if it makes you depressed. But try the practice first because you may be able to do the key thing, which is to experience that gritty reality in a joyful context of your potential liberation from it. Because we are taking our part in the myth of Vajrasattva, our homecoming. After the countless, complex trials and wrong turnings there have been in our lives, we can now see, at long last, the possibility of arriving in our true home.

Difficulty and resistance needs to be experienced in the body, not dwelt on too much in thoughts. Hence, the practice requires us to become very embodied, and the process of transformation, too, needs to be physical.

There are two broad phases in the Vajrasattva sadhana, both of which involve opening to new experience. In the first you open up to the element of difficulty we have been describing. In the second you open up to the release represented by Vajrasattva. For this kind of opening you need to enthusiastically embrace the living reality of emptiness (*sunyata*), a vital practical component in all sadhana practice.

The truth of *sarvadharmasunyata* is that all dharmas, that is whatever we may cognise as separate things, are in fact unbounded by the idea we have of them.

They are not, essentially, those things. Rather, they are conceptions we have formed from our point of view, conditioned as that is by the multitude of circumstances underlying our existence in the present moment. Their actual nature is indescribable. This applies to objective things such as our knees, planetary bodies or the district where we live, as well as subjective things like ourselves and our political convictions. Our conception of these things is usually set into something solid. Arguably those in the first example may be said to have some kind of existence independent of our thoughts, but the main thing for us is our experience of them, and for our present purpose that is what is important. All experience is conditioned by other factors within our current state. Everything within experience is empty of self-nature: nothing is essentially what it appears to be, nothing has any kind of permanent, unchanging existence as itself. From other points of view it will appear as some other thing, or a component in something else. These other things are no less real. The knee is part of the leg, the body, the knee-shape, the idea of a bend. It is a landing place, a meal, an object of obsessive desire or repulsion or agony. If it can be perceived in this way or that, can any be said to be the real knee? The sun can be measured by instruments. Its physical constituents and inner forces can be known more or less by certain experts, yet there is much about its nature that remains unknown. Meanwhile for us, it is the experience in our world of generalised heat, cold, light and shade, and our needs, based on those qualities, that change on a momentary basis. We see it up there in the sky, we see it rise and fall, see its absence overnight, but what do we see? What is the real sun, in itself, beyond our conditioned imputations and projections? And when we think of the district we live in, what kind of a thing is that? Well, like anything you can name it is a *dharma* that is empty of any permanent, solid existence. Its existence, like that of all things, is relative to other factors, changeable, and dependent. To use a Buddhist framework that points to the same overall reality as *sunyata*, it is *paticcasamuppada*, dependent arising.

Recalling this universal truth unveils the fact that nothing in experience is really solid, so that potentially, wherever you look, is revelation. Boundaries and categories of every kind, including 'me', 'Vajrasattva', 'body' and 'mind' are overlays that we have created on the basis of our conditionings and tend to fix, in our imagination of them, as though they were permanent realities. The truth is that nothing is there in any permanent sense. Appearances are empty of self-nature; whatever is there has an illusory quality. Nothing is what it seems.

Hence, as the crystal nectar fills the body, let go and observe your experience as empty and open, loosening those assumptions of fixedness. The letting go is an essential aspect of the process of transformation.

In sadhana generally there are two main aspects. There is first what is called the development or cultivation phase, in which you create the visualisation,

recite the mantra, and generally just perform the sadhana until it is well founded and you can do it anytime without any hesitation. You feel well-rehearsed in your part. You have absorbed it well so that for example maybe you can do a short version, a long version, a version with less visualisation and more feeling, a version which is more based on the samayasattva or the jnanasattva aspects (i.e. the appearance of Vajrasattva and the living reality he represents), and another version where you really focus on some of the symbolism like the vajra. That phase is the developmental phase.

The completion phase is when the realisation that comes from the sadhana is starting to affect you in all kinds of ways that aren't predictable. You aren't doing it so much as it is doing you, completing you as you really are. You don't try and do anything. You simply let go and let the process that has been set going through the developmental phase run its course. In the completion phase of Vajrasattva, you don't visualise Vajrasattva, but you sit with your own Vajrasattvahood. This is the Mahamudra or mindfulness phase: you simply experience your body and mind as it really is—and that is Vajrasattva.

So let us start. First, here again is the main text of the sadhana. Below that I will comment on whatever details seem most relevant.

3. The Meditation of Vajrasattva

[One should say and think]:

'On the crown of one's ordinary human body is the effulgent body of Vajrasattva, the Embodiment of the Five Buddhas, White, shining, with dorje and bell, wearing ornaments, cross-legged, smiling, with compassionate expression, with Hum in the centre of the heart, surrounded by the circle of letters, from [both of] which issues milk-like nectar [that penetrates] from the crown of one's head to the sole of one's feet, whereupon disease, evil spirits, sin, eclipse [of good in the heart] are destroyed. Like a crystal vase filled with curds, like clear and void light [one's body becomes].'

OM VAJRASATTVA etc. One should repeat [this mantra] many times.

One should [then] think that in the sky there is a mass of white lotuses edge to edge, on the petals of each of which sits Vajrasattva with HUM in the centre of the heart etc. Beneath each Vajrasattva is a man. From the mantras [surrounding the HUM] light issues and falls upon the head of each man and takes away his sin so that he becomes like a crystal vase filled with curds. - Thus should one think.

When these [practices] are finished [one should repeat] the prayer:

Vajrasattva Mahasattva,
All-knowing Vajra
Vajra [the] Primeval Samantabhadra
To [thee] Vajrasattva, I bow!

[Then] repeat this prayer of four lines:

'O Protector Vajrasattva, Ignorant and stupid am I; From your Samaya I have fallen away. Guru, Protector, Refuge, Supreme Vajra-holder, The Essence of Great Compassion, To [thee] the Best of Biped, I bow!'

Thus one's own and others' sins are purified.

From Vajrasattva's mouth: 'My son, from today your sins and those of all other people are wiped out.'

[one should say and reflect:]

'By the light from Vajrasattva's body one's own and other's sins are purified. Become Vajrasattva, each is absorbed in the body of the Guru on the head. Transformed into light, they are united into one. He is dissolved into the Void.

One should do this 100,000 times. For the purpose of daily practice one should simply recite the mantra and say and think: Vajrasattva, transformed into light, is absorbed into one's own body.' So much will suffice.

3. *The Meditation of Vajrasattva* is the heading since, as explained earlier, this is the third of the Five Mula Yogas.

(One should say and think), is primarily an injunction to enact what follows in imagination. That is the main thing.

But then, the idea that one *should say* it suggests that what follows is not particularly meant for silent internal practice. Sadhanas are in fact often recited out loud. Maybe we would find recitation helpful ourselves in daily practice. Reciting the words of the sadhana turns it into a ritual similar to a puja, and you can embellish it with ritual elements such as offering lights and incense, bell ringing, and mantra chanting. Of course mantra chanting is already part of the sadhana. It is often said that sadhanas can be done as pujas, and pujas as sadhanas. I have included a sevenfold puja based on the Vajrasattva sadhana at the end of this text.

Another angle on recitation is that it's always a good idea to learn the words of a sadhana off by heart and reading it out repeatedly achieves that. The Vajrasattva sadhana is fairly short so it won't be long before you have it all memorised. So have the text in front of you in your daily practice, and read it aloud until wherever you stop reading, you can fill in the next part from memory.

On the crown of one's ordinary human body seems to emphasise that what we take for granted, the 'ordinary human body,' is potentially something extraordinary.

At our crown is *the effulgent body of Vajrasattva, the Embodiment of the Five Buddhas*. The word 'effulgent' means 'brightly shining' and is often used of a person's expression, meaning they are 'emanating joy or goodness.' This certainly fits Vajrasattva's general persona. Yet some people find him cold. This is interesting. Perhaps there is a tendency to project on to him the difficult states that he purifies. It could well be that simply seeing his purity somehow reminds us of our faults, which is unpleasant.

In reality however Vajrasattva's bright effulgence, as *the Embodiment of the Five Buddhas*, is intensely joyful. Within his primordial Buddha Nature (*sugatagarbha*), he encompasses the fusion of the dharmadhatu, mirror-like, equal taste, investigative, and all-accomplishing wisdoms. This innate nature is alive within us all, yet often goes unnoticed. It is this hidden potential that fuels the transformative purification process.

From this perspective, white Vajrasattva reflects the radiance of the five wisdoms through the purification of the mind facilitated by the presence of *sugatagarbha*. In contrast white Vairocana, positioned at the centre of the mandala of the five jnanas, embodies the Dharmadhatu wisdom from which the other four wisdoms emanate. Thus, the mandala of five Buddhas symbolizes the awakened state, representing its content, while Vajrasattva represents the dynamic process of purification and transformation. Vajrasattva's encompassing of all these qualities is represented by the five Buddhas adorning his crown.

White, shining: he is radiant with the clarity and purity of these profound wisdoms. The colour *white* represents the pristine light out of which emerges the full spectrum of colours. His radiant whiteness, like the sun's brilliance reflected on snow, expresses how the Vajrasattva state is illuminated by the harmonious unity of the five jnanas. This illumination is indescribably powerful and initially, if we lack confidence, may feel intimidating or chilling, like ice. However, with time we come to realise that it is not inherently harsh. Its overwhelming brightness stems from our failure to recognize and embrace what the light signifies within our own experience—the innate potential for awakening. Here we encounter a misguided perception that is typical of what the practice purifies.

We should remember that meditation encompasses more than just the visual imagination. It is important to connect with the inner qualities that symbols represent, allowing the image to emerge from there. This is how, returning to Vajrasattva's association with the five jnanas, we can draw more from our own experience about what those truly entail.

Each of the Wisdoms, in the way they are described, give a clue as to how to appreciate their particular freeing quality. The word *dharmadhatu* means something like the realm of universal truths. The wisdom of *dharmadhatu* is the rich, central underlying wisdom in which all the others partake. The mirror wisdom is seeing that the object is in the subject, as it is in a mirror. In other words, everything we encounter is also a part of our own mind, as the perceiver and their perception are not separate entities.

The equal wisdom stresses the commonality of this non-separation in all dharmas. This realisation brings a sense of closeness, even oneness, with all things.

The investigation wisdom is induced through a meticulous examination of facets of our experiences. It entails asking critical questions, such as whether the assumed arising experience is truly occurring and, if so, how precisely does it manifest? Can you genuinely observe its occurrence? If yes, then where does it happen, and for whom does it take place? This investigative process challenges our assumptions and allows us to delve deeper into the nature of our experiences.

The all-accomplishing wisdom doesn't have a particular quality of its own, but refers simply to the fact that wisdom will always be reflected in action as a natural result, and that the quality of such action is likely to be highly skilful and effective.

...with dorje and bell, wearing ornaments, cross-legged, smiling with compassionate expression: Vajrasattva's appearance is further described. As well as being white and shining, he holds the *dorje and bell*, is *wearing ornaments*, is *cross legged*, and *smiling with a compassionate expression*. The smile is that mysterious smile of the Awakened one who smiles for the special reason that only Buddhas can smile, and of course it is compassionate. He is seated in meditation posture, in vajra posture which is frequently also called *padmasana* or the lotus posture. Vajrasattva is wearing ornaments: anklets, necklaces, bracelets, and a five crested crown—and that is all he is wearing. In this text at least, Vajrasattva is naked, expressing the natural state of uncovered, uncontrived awakening. In most images he is shown with floating garments as well.

The vajra and the bell hold immense significance as primary manifestations of the state of Vajrasattvahood, symbolising wisdom and compassion.

The symbol of wisdom is the vajra bell (*vajraghanta*), held upright in Vajrasattva's left hand. Wisdom is a feminine quality and the bell, adorned with the head of the Goddess Prajnaparamita, carries a deeply feminine symbolism. When struck, it produces a powerful vibrating sound that can make one's ears ring. It is sometimes called *vajragarbha*, vajra womb. This is because Prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom or the full realisation of *sunyata*, is the only gateway to Buddhahood. Symbolically, in their journey to awakening, every Buddha has been born from her womb. Within the rim of the bell, there exists a single clapper, reminiscent of a male element suspended within the encompassing female element. As the clapper strikes the inner surface of the bell, its vibrations resound, singing out with profound joy that can endure for several minutes.

The symbol of compassion is the vajra, which Vajrasattva holds in his right hand. Wisdom is about knowing and understanding; compassion is about appropriate action. So the vajra represents the dynamic and influential power of the awakened state. Truth carries a force akin to lightning, possessing a potency to obliterate obstacles and effortlessly transmit its essence. Just as lightning is swift and illuminating, the truth can swiftly dispel ignorance and express its wisdom.

The symbol of compassion is the vajra, which Vajrasattva holds in his right hand. In the awakened state, wisdom encompasses knowing and understanding, while compassion manifests through appropriate action. The vajra represents the dynamic and influential power of this. Similar to lightning, truth carries a force of its own. It possesses a potency capable of obliterating obstacles and effortlessly transmitting its essence. Just as lightning swiftly illuminates the darkness, truth can swiftly dispel ignorance and express its inherent wisdom.

In the complexity of its structure, the vajra is a powerful symbol that embodies the interplay between wisdom and compassion. Usually vajras have five points at each end, those at one end representing the five skandhas and the points at the other representing the five Buddhas. This configuration symbolises the potential for transforming the five skandhas into the five wisdoms, even suggesting a degree of correspondence between the nature of each skandha and each wisdom.

Five-pointed vajras are referred to as *samaya vajras*. The nine-pointed ones are known as wisdom vajras. Their extra spokes accommodate the wisdom consorts of the five Buddhas, while at the other end of the vajra, the nine spokes either intersperse the four Brahmaviharas between the five skandhas, or represent the

eightfold path with its realisation at the centre. Hence the design of the vajra (and the vajra bell) expresses intricate interrelationships and qualities associated with Vajrasattva.

Now the external appearance of Vajrasattva has been fully described, let us explore the inner experience or 'vajra' body, since what is envisioned 'out there' is intended to reflect what is 'in here.' In most sadhanas in our tradition this coincides with an evocation of the essential purity of experience through the mantra *om svabhavasuddha sarvadharmasvabhavasuddho 'ham* (all dharmas are pure; I too am pure). This mantra does not appear in the Vajrasattva sadhana, but it is appropriate to recall the same message here as a means to abandon the structures of conventional reality and focus on current experience without assumption as to its nature. Hence experience becomes pure: pure of expectation, pure of assumption beyond our usual naming of things. Often at this point one is invited to experience everything as though it were like an endless blue sky, completely open and transparent. When seen in this purified way, our body and mind experience manifests as what is known as the 'central channel' along which energies may travel between the main energy centres (*chakras*) at the crown, throat, heart, lower belly, and pelvic floor. The energy centres are generally associated with symbolic sound-syllables that express their particular quality and significance. From this point onwards, both the practitioner's body and that of the *vidam* or meditation deity are imagined in this kind of way.

In the Vajrasattva practice the emphasis, in the deity seen as outside us, is on his heart. The practice instructs us to imagine *HUM at the centre of the heart, surrounded by the circle of letters from both of which issue milk-like nectar*. While the sadhana does not explicitly mention it, we can imagine Vajrasattva seated on a white lotus. He is, of course, situated immediately above the crown of our head.

The significance of HUM at the centre of Vajrasattva's heart is of great importance. The sound syllable symbolizes awakening in the form of primordial sound. It is also a seed, *bīja*. Jayarava's study, based on Kukai's analysis, reveals that HUM acts as a device to unlock the true nature of reality.[§] Bija mantras are regarded as powerful condensed syllables that encompass vast meanings within a single sound. At the core of HUM lies the concept of indivisibility—a state that cannot be divided or separated, that is inherently inseparable. This quality

[§] ' In Kūkai's analysis then hūṃ is a hermeneutical device which can unlock the true nature of reality. It is massively polyvalent, which is to say that it has almost infinite meaning because of the network of associations that it sits at the center of.' The Seed Syllable Hūṃ by Jayarava, <http://www.visiblemantra.org/hum.html>

of indivisibility encapsulates the wisdom inherent in the Vajra state of being, the Vajra-sattva.

Although the sadhana does not specify colours, we know from the oral tradition that HUM is to be visualised as a deep blue. Around it is a circle comprising the one hundred white syllables of the Vajrasattva mantra.**

Next, the text states that from both the seed syllable 'HUM' and the circle of 100 syllables, *there issues milk-like nectar [that penetrates from the crown of one's head to the soles of one's feet, whereupon disease, evil spirits, sin, and eclipse [of good in the heart] are destroyed..* This milk-like nectar represents amrta, the ambrosia of immortality. It possesses a liquid quality that can be felt as a tactile sensation, yet it is also alive and self-illuminating.

Vajrasattva has been described as illuminated by the purity of his vajra nature. This quality enters our inner body from above, from his heart, and purifies our entire being. Here our imagination of the inner body can include all the energy centres from the crown all the way down to the root chakra. What accomplishes this purification is the understanding that everything is pure from the very beginning. When we perceive and accept things as they are, everything is inherently perfect and right. The purification process is somewhat like scanning down through the body in a mindfulness exercise, as the nectar flows with awareness from the crown of the head to the soles of the feet, permeating every part. The text beautifully describes this process as filling the body *like a crystal vase filled with curds*. This imagery elicits a sense of settled peace and crystal clear purity. An alternative image could be freshly fallen snow within a crystal jar. The effect of this visualization may facilitate a direct entry into a state of undivided concentration.

The setup is now complete. Vajrasattva is above, his influence filling you like liquid crystal, gently cancelling out unskilful motives and samskaras as it flows, purifying and healing throughout your entire body.

Now is the time to begin reciting the mantra.

OM

VAJRASATTVA SAMAYA MANUPALAYA
VAJRA SATTVA TVENOPATISHTA
DRDHO ME BHAVA SUTOSYO ME BHAVA SUPOSYO ME BHAVA

** This may require some imagination and patience. It is perhaps enough to imagine these as a hundred points of light. A helpful approach is to imagine roughly twenty-five lights spanning a quarter of the circle and once this configuration is established, complete the rest of the circle accordingly.

ANURAKTO ME BHAVA
SARVA SIDDHIM ME PRAYACCHA SARVA KARMA SUCHA ME CITTAM
SREYAH KURU HUM
HA HA HA HA HOH
BHAGAVAN SARVA TATHAGATA VAJRAMA ME MUNCHA
VAJRI BHAVA MAHA SAMAYASATTVA
AH HUM PHAT

Let us briefly delve into the meaning of the mantra. The initial phrase OM VAJRASATTVA SAMAYA refers to the concept of samaya, which is a crucial aspect of the sadhana, representing the pledge or promise we make to honour our nature as potentially awakened. In taking up this practice we have a responsibility to realise it. Samaya is the resulting sense of obligation which only increases as realisation grows. It requires our attention and also frequent repair when we veer away from it.

MANUPALA calls on Vajrasattva as the protector of beings.

VAJRA SATTVA TVENOPATISHTA expresses the request for Vajrasattva to be strong and supportive.

DRDHO ME BHAVA, SUTOSYO ME BHAVA, SUPOSYO ME BHAVA, ANURAKTO ME BHAVA implore Vajrasattva to be pleased, to support us, and to have a strong feeling of love for us.

SARVA SIDDHIM ME PREYACCHA, SARVA KARMA SUCHA ME seeks the granting of all accomplishments and the purification of all actions.

CITTAM SREYAH KURU HUM is the climax in the prayer, the heartfelt wish for the practice to transform our mind into a better state.

The mantra then explodes with laughter in HA HA HA HA HOH. Awakening from a lifetime of ignorance is a liberating surprise that can also be profoundly amusing as one realises the extent of previous misconceptions.

BHAGAVAN SARVA TATHAGATA VAJRAMA ME MUNCHA addresses all the Blessed Buddhas, the Tathagatas, inviting their blessing.

VAJRI BHAVA is a request to them to 'be like a vajra' and embody that quality.

MAHA SAMAYASATTVA celebrates Vajrasattva as a hero who connects us all through the truth of innate primordial wisdom.

AH – the hundredth syllable – signifies release, relief, and wonderment.

The mantra often concludes with HUM PHAT! HUM is added in situations involving death, and PHAT evokes a dismissal of demonic elements.

Summary: the mantra invokes Vajrasattva and acknowledges our connection with him through the samaya pledge. It calls for Vajrasattva's presence, love, and support before the central aspiration prayer for the benefit and transformation of our mind. At the prospect of this request actually being fulfilled, a burst of joyful laughter ensues. At this point, we realise the presence

of all the Buddhas, experience amazement, and offer praise to the Vajra state, ultimately resting in a state of wonder and awe.

The Vajrasattva mantra does indeed convey immense significance. As we repeat it within the sadhana, perhaps fifty or a hundred times, it is possible to vary the rhythm and tone as a way of attuning ourselves in response to the current state of our body and mind. For example, during moments of calm and stability the recitation can be gentle and steady, mirroring the peacefulness within. At other times the recitation might become more vibrant and dynamic, perhaps in relation to an intensification of our aspiration. We need to learn it through trial and error, but overall such adaptation and interplay allows us to connect more deeply with the transformative power of Vajrasattva.

As we engage in the mantra repetition, the nectar descends into the body. As it flows, we can feel its entry point at the top of the skull and from there spreading throughout the entire crown chakra, which can be experienced as blissful and luminous like silvery moonlight. Of course such description is highly metaphorical but inviting a somewhat poetic sensibility into our practice will help open up the potential of the symbols of the sadhana.

The descent of the *amṛta*, or nectar, follows the central channel from the Brahmaṇḍa (the aperture of Brahma) at the top of the head, gradually penetrating the interior of the head and descending to the throat centre. At every point in the descent, the instruction is to be open to, acknowledge, accept and embody every tiny sensation and association that arises. Some sensations for example may be accompanied by feelings of discomfort, fear, or a sense of transgression. Others may spark memories and images. There is likely to be a range of sensations and feelings, pleasant and painful. This is because, in calling upon Vajrasattva, we are embarking upon the transformation of our karmic inheritance, the habitual tendencies set up by past activity. The Yogachara tradition likens the body experience to a granary filled with millions of different varieties of seed, each lying dormant but capable of being activated. This is about the miraculous way that our memory holds each historical thought and interaction latent within the body along with the complex of response and muscle memory connected to that past moment. These 'seeds' are still very much alive, even if, like an acorn kept in a package on a shelf, they play no part in our conscious lives. If touched with water, though, each seed is ready to sprout, with extensive consequences that may affect our mood and indeed, our whole experience from that point of activation.

As the descending truth-nectar from Vajrasattva's heart enters this granary, certain seeds will be touched by its healing influence, and we need to allow this to happen for the practice to be effective. It continues down to fill the chest,

shoulders and arms, eventually reaching the navel centre located in front of the spine at the level of the navel and the abdomen. It further descends toward the energy centre at the base of the sexual organ, encompassing the hips, pelvic region, the complex architecture around the pelvis, the tip of the spine, the legs and feet, finally resting at the Muladhara chakra – the root of the posture at the pelvic floor. The nectar completely fills the body, creating a fine sensation of fullness and presence.

After this, one may also visualise the nectar rising, ascending from the base and moving upwards through the body and its energy centres until it reaches the crown once again. This gives a very full sense of illumination and radiance. In the words of the sadhana it is as though the crystalline vase of the body were filled with curds: cool, translucent, and resplendent.

From this point, the process of purification continues outside the body:

One should [then] think that in the sky there is a mass of white lotuses edge to edge, on the petals of each of which sits Vajrasattva with HUM in the centre of the heart etc. Beneath each Vajrasattva is a man. From the mantras [surrounding the HUM] light issues and falls upon the head of each man and takes away his sin so that he becomes like a crystal vase filled with curds. - Thus should one think.

Here of course ‘man’ means ‘a person.’ This is a beautiful moment within the practice that reflects your Bodhicitta heart-wish for all to receive what you yourself are receiving. Have a sense of letting go the boundaries of space that exist in your mind, and fill that infinitely expanded space with universal Vajrasattva transformation!

Then, *When these [practices] are finished [one should repeat] the prayer:*

‘Vajrasattva Mahasattva, All knowing Vajra, Vajra the Primeval Samantabhadra, to [thee] Vajrasattva, I bow. The name ‘Samantabhadra’ means ‘the All-good.’ Here we pay honour to the state or the being of Vajrasattva, addressing him as great, as all knowing, and as Goodness beyond the concept of time.

Next there is a confession prayer: *O Protector Vajrasattva, Ignorant and stupid am I; From your Samaya I have fallen away.* A prayer like this could be reworded in any way appropriate to what we may wish to confess, or even expressed silently, transcending words. The essence of confession lies in sincerely confronting our inner obstacles. It is crucial that we engage in a meaningful practice at this juncture. Guilt should find no place; instead, aim to genuinely confront the truth of our imperfections without inflicting unnecessary blame upon ourselves. This is an opportunity to pause and clarify our attitude.

We conclude with a gesture of deep reverence. *Guru, Protector, Refuge, Supreme Vajra-holder, The Essence of Great Compassion, To [thee] the Best of Bipeds, I bow. Thus one’s own and others’ sins are purified.’*

Instead of using the term 'sins,' it is more suitable to replace it with 'obstacles.' And for us in the west, the term 'bipeds' may come across as a comical way of referring to us humans. While appreciating that it originates from indigenous traditions that recognise diverse forms of life, including one-legged, two-legged, four-legged, six-legged, eight-legged, and many-legged beings, I personally prefer to use the expression "Best of Beings."

The prayer having been made, Vajrasattva's blessing comes as a response. *From Vajrasattva's mouth: 'My son, from today your sins and those of all other people are wiped out.'* This holds profound significance, since it points to the emptiness and ultimate nonexistence of affliction (*kleśa*). This is a special liberating teaching of Vajrasattva. The nature of mind, impermanent and empty with no substance, is a timeless reality that cannot be destroyed or changed by the temporary manifestations of unskillful views or deeds that come with the transient circumstances of life. The intrinsic nature of mind remains untouched and indestructible.

From here one may simply sit and contemplate the vajra state as the final transformation unfolds:

By the light from Vajrasattva's body one's own and other's sins are purified. Become Vajrasattva, each is absorbed in the body of the Guru on the head. Transformed into light, they are united into one. He is dissolved into the Void.

The infinite beings in all directions are absorbed upwards into the Vajrasattva above them and themselves become Vajrasattva, as their real nature. This fulfils the overall aim of the sadhana, that is to be reunited with who we have essentially always been.

Then we absorb all the Vajrasattvas into ourselves, that is we absorb all the other Vajrasattvas into the Vajrasattva we have just become. We sit with that, feel what it is like to be Vajrasattva who is all Vajrasattvas and who is the Vajra state. Then when the feeling of that passes, you let the visualisation dissolve away.

The sadhana ends there.

In a short explanation, the text explains that the mantra should be done 100,000 times, the usual figure for the Mula Yogas, and that it is enough just to recite the mantra and identify Vajrasattva with our own body.

There our text ends. Of course, the text is not the practice just as 'the map is not the territory.' The real terrain of the Vajrasattva sadhana arises when the practice has been established over long practice of following the instructions, adapting them to our needs, and letting the meaning sink in over time. The real

practice entails learning what it means to become Vajrasattva and putting that into practice whatever way we can. It is of little use merely to do the practice in a mechanical way, or by trying to perfect the visualisation so that you can easily perform it. You need to find a way to let the sadhana have its own life.

A Vajrasattva puja

Worship

On the crown of my ordinary human body
Is the effulgent body of Vajrasattva
White, shining, with Dorje and Bell
Wearing Ornaments and seated crosslegged
And smiling with compassionate expression.
Vajrasattva!
All knowing vajra!
Vajra the primeval Samantabhadra!
To you, Vajrasattva, I bow.

OM VAJRASATTVA SAMAYA etc.

Refuge

I take refuge in the Buddha
I take refuge in the Dharma
I take refuge in the Sangha
I wish to cease harming
And stealing
Sexual harm,
Lying
And mindless acts.
And abandon greed:
May I be tranquil
Abandon hate:
May I act with compassion
Abandon ignorance:
May the five wisdoms blaze

Confession

O Protector Vajrasattva,
I have been ignorant and foolish
From your samaya I have fallen away
O great Protector of the Bond
Please hear my open hearted confession
And help me realise the Vajra state

Rejoicing

I have been born in a world of beauty
And I rejoice!
I rejoice in the good fortune
Of all beings throughout space

I rejoice in the purity
Of earth and water
Fire and wind
Space and awareness
I rejoice in the truth
That your mind and mine
Are inseparable

Entreaty

Oh Vajrasattva
Buddha beyond time
Show the timeless truth
Things as they are
May all obstruction be purified!

From today every kind of obscuration,
Evil spirit,
Unskilful word and deed,
Whatever may eclipse the good,
Whatever barrier there may be,
Becomes transparent as crystal.
From HUM in Vajrasattva's heart
Surrounded by the circle of letters
There issues milk-white nectar
Penetrating the crown of our heads
Descending to the soles of our feet,
Thereby all obstacles are destroyed.
By the light from Vajrasattva's body
Our own and others' faults are purified.
Become Vajrasattva,
Each is absorbed in the body of the Guru.

AH HUM PHAT!

Dedication of merits
May the light of the Vajrasattva state
Reach all in the ocean of samsara
May the merit of recalling his light
Bring all beings to Awakening.

OM VAJRASATTVA HUM