

The Mission, Virtues, and Core Values of the Dharma Ocean Lineage

Introduction

Dharma Ocean is a lineal descendent of the “practicing lineage” of Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche and an expression of his Vajrayana teachings. It provides a path to spiritual realization that is clear, direct, accessible, and eminently doable in the modern world. It is all about fully inhabiting our life and our world as sacred; it is about becoming a complete human being and finding our true place within the infinity of being.

The Mission of Dharma Ocean

The mission of Dharma Ocean is threefold: first, to study and practice the teachings of the “practicing lineage,” as articulated by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, emphasizing especially his Vajrayana dharma; second to transmit to others the view and the step by step path to realization of the practicing lineage; and third, to make whatever adjustments and adaptations, such as a greater emphasis on embodiment and direct experience, as may be necessary or order to render this lineage fully accessible in our present world.

Trungpa Rinpoche explains the “practicing lineage” in this way: *The practicing lineage is not something that you can see as an other. It's something you can only realize from within. And, frankly, the practicing lineage realizes itself. There isn't even a person to realize the practicing lineage. The practicing lineage means relying on the practice of meditation and the mind of meditation as the center of one's existence and the source of one's life. It is about finding the answer to life by surrendering to the openness, the insight, and the resources of the present moment. That's the practicing lineage. Our job is to guard it and defend it with our lives. Our job is to make sure that other people don't misunderstand it—and that we don't misunderstand it—as something that can be known as an objective object of knowledge and something that can be possessed in any way whatsoever, institutionally or personally or socially or whatever.¹*

1) The Nature of this Lineage

A lineage in the Buddhist sense involves a body of spiritual teaching that is passed down from one generation to another. In Trungpa Rinpoche's case, he was transmitting a certain experience of practice, understanding, and realization that was unique to the transmission he had received from his own teachers. He passed this on to me and his other early students, and he very specifically and pointedly asked each of us to pass on what we received from him.

In the Buddha's day, it was the same. The Buddha's ongoing lineage was born the day he met five former companions with whom he had spent six years in retreat. The Buddha pointed to the

nature of awakening with a simple instruction and one of them, Ajnata Kaundinya, “got it.” And so, the Buddha’s fundamental teaching about awakening had been passed on to Kaundinya, then the other four, and they passed it on to others, and so down through the centuries and millennia.

In spite of what many people assume today, an authentic lineage has inherently nothing to do with institutions, organizations, official hierarchies, or bureaucratic control. It is essentially a certain experience and way of being human. Many of the most profound spiritual lineages in Buddhism have passed from one teacher to one or two disciples, on the margins of prevailing social “correctness” and conventional thinking, and sometimes out of public view. In fact, throughout history in India and beyond, far too often institutionalized Buddhism has been going in the exact opposite direction of authentic lineage transmissions and has even opposed them.²

2) The Central Place of Meditation in the Practicing Lineage

Meditation, and the direct, personal experience of the teachings it leads to, are the essence and core of this lineage. The purpose of meditation is to connect with ultimate meditative awareness, termed by Trungpa Rinpoche “the awakened state.” In true Vajrayana style, we understand our human body as the gateway to enlightenment. This is not, of course, our body as we usually think of it and as seen in conventional thinking. Instead, it is the literal experience of our own human body when discovered through the lens of interoception or direct, internal somatic inspection.

In Vajrayana, the human body is pointed out and personally discovered to be nothing other than the Buddha’s own threefold body of enlightenment. These are the three dimensions of our fundamentally, already fully awakened, incarnate being: immaculate awareness, our most fundamental nature; the energy of awareness, selfless compassion; and the spontaneous responsiveness that flows naturally from that. All of these occur always and continuously outside of ego’s framework. When we are fully connected with this “enlightened body” of ourselves, we are, as Suzuki Roshi says, truly “Buddha.”

The hallmark of the Vajrayana is that we *begin* with the fruition of the journey; we begin by pointing out in a fully experiential way the reality of enlightenment within us. Meditation is the space within which we receive this fruition and the method by which we develop it in ourselves. Thus, it becomes a matter of our direct personal knowledge and can henceforth be a guiding light in our practice.

The Vajayana approach is thus in sharp contrast with the more common, top down, conceptual approaches to meditation that are widely found in modern Buddhism. To say more, as we know from neuroscience, the body is the realm of direct, naked, unmediated experience; the thinking mind is the realm of labeling, categorizing, conceptualizing, and discursive thinking. The thinking mind cannot experience anything directly; rather, it takes the direct, non-conceptual experience of the Soma, labels and categorizes it, reducing naked experience to a concept. Thus experience, mediated and filtered through our battery of mental pigeonholes, becomes the butterfly pinned to the display board; the living butterfly is no more.

This is why the somatic approach to meditation is so critical. Direct, non-conceptual experience is a somatic event that can clearly, directly, and uniquely transmit the truths of the dharma in an unprecedented way. This is so important because, without direct, personal, fully embodied experience, no real and fundamental transformation is possible. As the somatic psychologist Eugene Gendlin famously said, it is only direct experience itself that can fundamentally transform us.

Seen in this way, meditation is not about creating some specialized Buddhist or Vajrayana reality. Its purpose is nothing other than to bring us to our human experience fully and completely, to clarify it, nourish, and ripen it through practice. And then to expand this to include the nourishing and flourishing of all other beings. There is nothing beyond this. It is not to become some special or “higher being,” or to escape into a higher state of consciousness, but to be fully here, fully within our life, and present in our day-to-day lives. Such was the realization of the Buddha and this is what we strive toward as well.

3) The Sangha

The container for this lineage is the Dharma Ocean Sangha, the association of those committed to the perspectives, values, and practices of this lineage. We refer to our sangha as a “forest tradition” meaning that it is not and cannot be centralized. There is no enduring headquarters. While at any given time we may have some kind of structures and roles to enable us to transmit the teachings to others, these are not in any way essential.

We have and plan to have only as much structure as we need to deliver the teachings in a responsible manner. Beyond that, every practitioner is fundamentally on their own, responsible for their own journey and for seeking out the teachings. In the stories of our lineage forebears, you can clearly see that the authentic teachings are not easily found. In fact, it has often taken a great deal of effort and perseverance, and truthfully much suffering, to find the teacher and the teachings that may be so ardently sought. Of course, it has to be that way; the authentic dharma is definitely not new age, ersatz spirituality.

What, then, does it mean to be a member of the sangha of this lineage today? The most important qualification is that you simply would like to become part of this lineage stream, become familiar with its approach, and be trained in its practices; and, in essence, to gain direct, personal, experiential understanding through prioritizing the practice of meditation. And you are open to fundamental transformation. Beyond that, there is no official approval process needed to be part of what we are doing. If this is what you want and if you are willing to commit yourself to this meditative journey, then that automatically qualifies you as a member of the sangha. It was the very same in the Buddha’s day. All you had to say was, “I want to do this; I want to be a student in this lineage.” And the Buddha said, “Ehi bhikkhu,” meaning, “then come along.”

What binds us together is this shared commitment to our own journeys, to meditation, to mutual respect of one another, and to supporting each other on our individual paths. Because these commitments are shared by all of us, then there can be a deep and enduring respect for one

another no matter how very, even entirely, different our backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, belief systems, life stages, countries, and cultures may be. In fact, such differences, rather than being a source of conflict and divisiveness, can be experienced as joyful reflections of the integrity, abundance, and creativity of sharing our unique and individual spiritual unfolding with one another.

Beyond that, to be a member of the Sangha, it is important to understand a few principles, most of which will already be obvious. To begin with, this is your journey. Each of us is responsible for their own experience, for their own pain, and for their own situation. This lineage offers a wide array of resources, including all the major teachings, through online programs, in person programs (soon, we hope), CD's, books, offerings on our website and elsewhere, and individual mentorship. The journey of this lineage is also laid out in our "steps on the path" document in a clear and step-by-step manner. So, you already have what you need to make a very full and very complete journey. Perhaps needed also is some encouragement and mentorship from me, Caroline, and the other senior Dharma Ocean folks.

But this cannot be stressed too much: this is your journey, and it is up to you to do the research into the lineage and its teachings, into its history and past and current teachers, and decide for yourself whether and how and according to what timing you would like to pursue the training that is offered. For those who strongly desire it and are willing to do the work, entry into Vajrayana training may be an option at some point.

4) The Primary Personal Obstacle: The Human Ego

For anyone seeking to pursue the path of this lineage, there needs to be utmost clarity on this one point: this lineage is most fundamentally about placing ourselves in a tradition where the egos of all of us, students and teachers alike, are continually challenged and called into question. There can be much humor and joy in this mutual process. But this journey toward "non-self" is also extraordinarily challenging and will demand all the insight, honesty, and courage that we can muster; and sometimes more than we can muster.

In the early 1970's, Trungpa Rinpoche emphasized this unique feature of this lineage: we must recognize the way we all hide behind our ego masks and we must commit to the process of "unmasking" and a willingness to have our little ego games and evasions exposed. Seen in this light, Trungpa Rinpoche's often repeated statement, "the job of the guru is to insult you," meaning our precious sense of "me," makes complete sense. And that isn't just the teacher's job, it is the single message of the dharma of this lineage itself in all of its aspects: buddha, dharma, sangha, in the Vajrayana, yidams, dakas, dakinis, and protectors. As Rinpoche also often reminded us, they all speak with one voice, that of the non-existence of "self."

It is not so unusual, today as in the past, to misunderstand the teachings on enlightenment as a promise for safety and security, a warm cozy nest where we can be held, massaged and coddled and we can all feel better. I myself was hoping for this in the beginning. But we all need to be clear that this is wishful thinking of the worst sort. There will come a day, sooner rather than

later, when we discover that all of our dreams, including our dreams about the dharma, will be shattered by the vast dharma, the limitless eventfulness of reality itself; and that only by passing through this gate will we come into the country of true freedom. If that is what we truly want, then we are in the right place.

5) The Role of Study on the Path

To make the journey offered by this lineage, it is essential that we have a good conceptual comprehension of what we are doing. Having a clear and accurate understanding will enable us to make sense of what we experience, avoid many pitfalls, and communicate effectively to others. This is why study of the teachings is a critical part of our training. In addition to studying the history and traditional sources of Asian and especially Tibetan Buddhism, it is also necessary to be well acquainted with modern day expressions of Trungpa Rinpoche, including how his teachings play out in Dharma Ocean, and of other dharma lineages. Beyond that, it is also important to understand the ways in which modern discoveries in history, psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and other disciplines can deepen and enrich our journey and help us fulfill our commitment as bodhisattvas.

6) Right View of the Teacher-Student Relationship

The Vajrayana is an ancient tradition, a time-tested body of lore about how to make a genuine and fruitful spiritual journey. As such, in order to pursue it, we need teachers and mentors who are themselves well trained in the tradition and willing to act as guides for us. In this and every authentic spiritual tradition there is a self-evident hierarchy between a teacher and a student, but it is a natural (as opposed to artificial) hierarchy based on mutual respect, commitment, vulnerability on both sides, and free choice. At the same time, from the ultimate point of view, there is no teacher and no student, just we humans making the journey, whatever stage we are at. Hence the importance of eye level communication between teacher and student. The underlying view is that, in the Buddha Nature, as the Tibetans say, we are all equally and exactly the same.

The student-teacher relationship in this lineage is about the authentic transmission and dissemination of knowledge, practice, and wisdom. To teach the full measure of this lineage, each of us must aspire to become well trained in all the important dimensions of our tradition. Our practice must be deep and consistent as a permanent feature of our lives. In fact, our training in the lineage is never “done;” we are never “finished.” Beyond that, teachers are expected to be trained to hold the responsibility of their position with openness, care, and modesty. Students are expected to consider seriously the instructions from teachers, but without mindless surrender or abandonment of their own identity, values, or perspectives. This lineage requires all of us to be adults in our work together. Each of us, teachers and students alike, are responsible for working through the patterns of projection and counter-projection, transference and countertransference, that are inevitable in such a momentous relationship.

Maintaining the right kind of healthy and functional hierarchical and, at the same time, also eye-level relationship is critical in this lineage. A teacher or mentor needs to “take their seat” and not attempt to be on the same level as the student by making nice or trying to be friends. There is a dignity to the position, to the role, that allows a teacher to lead without letting their egoic identity become conflated with their position or their emotional needs. When a teacher and a student are able to hold this paradox of hierarchy and non-hierarchy, the container can be completely transparent as a teacher seeks to be a good model for the student of emptiness, openness, vulnerability and the nakedness of the lineage itself.³

7) The Humanness of the Teacher, the Humanness of the Student

A person becomes a Vajrayana teacher because of their own study and practice under a capable teacher, their own resulting understanding, and their ability to communicate the teachings to us and help us make the journey to that realization. This alone is what we should be trusting in the Vajrayana teacher and this alone confers ultimate value on that person.

However, we could find ourselves attempting to trust the wrong thing, such as that the teacher will be some kind of idealized parent and fulfill our own expectations of that perfect parent or perfect anything, for that matter. This—I would call it inauthentic—trust involves the assumption that the teacher will never do anything that we will find threatening or upsetting, that will hurt our feelings, or that will be in anyway “unsupportive.” Many of our friendships carry those kinds of assumptions. But to put our own egoic expectations in charge when we are entering a tradition that fundamentally disconfirms our ego—the contradiction in that couldn’t be more obvious. And it is worth remembering that even in ordinary adult relationships, that kind of assurance can never be given because no one is ever going to fulfill our expectations and, in any case, the future can never be pinned down like that.

The kind of trust necessary between teacher and student is quite different: it must be open-ended and freely given as a gift to the other. The teacher is willing to trust the student’s declaration of the intention to commit to the meditative journey. The student is willing to trust the teacher’s intention to provide whatever they can toward the flourishing of the student’s spiritual quest. That mutually given trust leads to the openness, the clarity, the bravery, and the inner strength needed to weather the inevitable ups and downs of any important relationship and of the journey itself.

In this and in every key relationship in our lives, if we are not willing to take a chance, nothing will happen. Unless teacher and student are both willing to offer that open-ended trust to the other, the mutual exchange that is the essence of the teacher-student relationship will not be possible. It is this mutual trust alone that enables us, both teachers and students alike, to deepen our relationship to the teachings.

Thus, it goes without saying that all of the ups and downs of the teacher’s life—their full humanness—should not become reference points for us and should be understood as parts of any human life, nothing more. Every Vajrayana teacher is fully and completely human, just like us, and this fact should create much greater trust in the teacher and the teachings, as it works to

counter the unhealthy and counter-productive mutual projections of the student and of the teacher.

Awakening is not possessed by the Vajra master, they cannot give it to us. When we give away the power of our own insight and understanding to the teacher, then we have betrayed our commitment to the teacher and the lineage, and we have refused to look into the richness of this very moment of our lives. We as students must also “take our seats.”

Here is a helpful teaching by Thrangu Rinpoche: “Faith in one's guru does not mean blind faith. It does not mean believing 'My guru is perfect,' even though your guru is not perfect. It is not pretending that your guru's defects are [enlightened] qualities. It is not rationalizing every foible of the guru into superhuman virtue. After all, most gurus will have defects. You need to recognize them for what they are. You don't have to pretend that your guru's defects are [enlightened] qualities, because the object of your devotion is not the foibles, quirks, or defects of your guru, but the dharma that your guru teaches you. You are not practicing the guru's foibles. As long as the dharma you receive is authentic and pure, then that guru is a fit object for your devotion. The result that you get, you get from the dharma that you practice... You follow the teaching of the guru, and 'trust,' meaning trust principally in the validity of the teachings themselves.”

8) Devotion as Central to the Path

Devotion is right at the center of this lineage. As Trungpa Rinpoche says, this is a lineage essentially of devotion. You make the journey through devotion. Ultimately, devotion is devotion to our own deepest nature and to the journey that calls us to realize it. Other forms of devotion are just expressions of that basic devotion.

In the beginning, the devotion is to the teachings we discover with our teacher. The kind of relationship we have with our teacher and the particular kind of person our teacher is could take a million different forms. There are no rules. We could spend a lot of time around our teacher, like Milarepa, or we could meet our teacher just once or twice, receive teachings, and arrive at great attainment as did the female siddha Manibhadra. When we meet an authentic teacher we respond very powerfully to the central fact: we hear the teachings giving voice to our own deepest longings, which are the inherent devotion of the Buddha Nature. The teachings are speaking for and on behalf of our own deepest self, urging us to commit ourselves to ourselves, and to realize our true nature, and providing the practices to help us toward that ultimate realization.

9) Buddha Nature, Individuality, and Service

Buddhist universalism and our common human nature.

Buddhism affirms that all of us share a common human nature, known as Buddha Nature, that is much deeper and more enduring than anything that separates us. The Dharma enables all people to connect with and nurture this common humanity. Our lineage is a universal spiritual tradition offered to anyone who wishes to study, practice, and take up the journey. Today, those who have opened themselves to this lineage come from over a hundred countries in North and South America, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia, Australasia, and the Far East.

They reflect a brilliant and mind stopping array of races, ethnic groups, countries and cultures, societies, religious backgrounds, political beliefs, genders, ages, health conditions, and sexual orientations. All are welcome.

The sacred individuality of each.

The common human nature that we all share is not biased or limited by our particular histories, politics, or relative identities. It is defined instead by an awareness that is open and unconditioned, within which we can fully see and appreciate others just as they are, no matter how different from us they may be. Buddhism also holds that each of us is ultimately a unique individual and cannot be reduced to any collective. Because of our universal humanity, we are able to know others in all their individuality, without judgment or criticism, and we can feel empathy and love for them just as they are. And we can be amazed and nourished by their own incomparable experience of being human.

Engaging the larger world, Buddhist style.

That all people should have equal access to a dignified, resourced, and fulfilling human life is a given in modern Buddhism and in our lineage. Buddhism itself has a distinctive approach to social action that we follow. It lays a ground, as mentioned, of teachings and practices that help us develop our own capacities of receiving, seeing, appreciating, and loving others. For Buddhism, this unlocks our innate human inspiration to help others and is the most effective foundation of all our more external engagements to alleviate human inequality and suffering. In fact, inspired by this nurturing and rejuvenating foundation, among the global Dharma Ocean community, individuals pursue virtually every form of social engagement imaginable.

—Dr. Reggie Ray, Crestone, CO, January 31, 2021

¹ From the “Drub-Gyu” section of the revised *2005 Vajrayana Training Intensive Volume I* transcript, 66-67.

² See Reginald Ray, “The Three Lineages,” *Buddhadharma*. December 1, 2005 (available on the *Lion’s Roar* website).

³ For an excellent, in depth discussion of this topic, see “[The Role of the Teacher in Tibetan Buddhism: A Reader’s Guide to the Teacher-Student Relationship](#)” on the Shambhala Publications website.