

Vajrapani – Energy Unlimited

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It is very good to be at Padmaloka. It's a long time since I've been on a men's event, and I had forgotten how good they were. It has been very good to see friends old and new.

This morning I am talking about Vajrapani. The title of the talk is: 'Vajrapani – Energy Unlimited', and as you will have heard already from Paramabandhu who has, in a way, been giving you bits of my talk over the last day and a half, in his introductions and things... the vajra is this very powerful implement. It has the qualities of a thunderbolt. One of its qualities is that when you throw it, it always returns to your hand.

I am going to start, actually, not by talking about thunderbolts that return to your hand, but by talking about darts.

For those of you who haven't spent much time in English pubs, 'darts' is a sort of English pub game in which you – it's a bit like kind of being an archer but on a very small scale – you have a sort of feathered projectile which you throw at a board from a distance of about eight feet.

A few years ago some researchers did an experiment in which they took some people and they divided them into three groups: so it was a bit like if I was to divide you into three groups...

...So, this side of the room, I would ask you to do nothing whatsoever, particularly definitely *not* play darts, for the next six weeks, say. The middle of the room, I would ask you to practice playing darts *every day* for a certain period of time. The other side of the room, I would ask you *not* to play darts but to *imagine* yourself playing, for the same amount of time these other people are actually playing. Just imagine yourself going, 'thwack – double top – thwack – treble nineteen...' - yeah?... [LAUGHTER]

At the end of the period – say, six weeks, however long it is – I would get you back together and test each of your different groups to see if you had improved.

And you people over here [THE FIRST GROUP]: well, you haven't improved, but I suppose I can't expect you to have done – you haven't been playing, you haven't had anything to do with it, so why should you?

You people in the middle: well, you've been playing away, so if you are the same as the people they tested, you have improved by about 27 percent or something, in this period of time. You probably hadn't played much darts before, so you are starting from quite a low base.

Now the interesting thing is that you people over here who have just been *thinking* about playing darts: you have also improved. You have improved by almost as much as these people who are actually doing it; you have improved by, I think, about 22 percent.

I was very struck by reading about this. It makes me think quite a bit about how I learn a new skill; usually firstly I sort of study it, then I practice it. But there is also, usually – if there is anything that I'm interested in – almost involuntarily there is an aspect of mental rehearsal.

I remember when I was a kid I was really into playing football and I would play it at every conceivable opportunity. But also, for a lot of my time when I wasn't playing, when I was sitting in class or something at school, I would be imagining myself playing; I'd be imagining myself being Jimmy Greaves or Bobby Charlton or whoever my hero at the time was. And that certainly wasn't wasted time – well, it was wasted time if I was sitting in class and supposed to be studying history – but it actually seemed to have quite an effect on how I played football.

This sort of mental rehearsal is very common now. If you're a top athlete it's one of the things that you do. You spend a lot of time just seeing yourself turning up at the stadium for your event, getting changed, going to the starting line. You imagine the crowd; you imagine yourself when the starting gun goes; you see yourself running that perfect race; you see your name at the top of the list on the scoreboard; you see your time. And you just keep doing that over and over, and it does definitely seem to be very beneficial.

The interesting question is: 'how does all this mental rehearsal apply if we're trying to learn the skills of the Dharma; if we're trying to learn the skills of wisdom and compassion, or of ethical action, or awareness?'

In general, if we are trying to develop a positive quality, Buddhist tradition says there are three things we can do.

Suppose we are trying to develop 'virya' – suppose we are trying to develop 'Energy in Pursuit of the Good'. Firstly we can study, we can come to understand what virya is, we can read about it, we can listen to talks like this one.

Secondly it is suggested that we go away and really try to clarify what we've heard. We really try to reflect on what we've heard, see how far it is true for us, what questions we've got, and we try to resolve those until we are quite definite about what it is we are doing and why we are doing it, and we are really behind it.

And then lastly we *practice* it, in all sorts of ways. We put more energy into developing skilful mental states and doing away with unskilful mental states. But we can also use mental rehearsal. We can imagine ourselves acting with more energy; we can imagine ourselves really putting ourselves into situations with the whole of ourselves, and acting in skilful ways. We can imagine what it would be like if we had a great deal of energy,

moving in the direction of Enlightenment.

So as we will see, this all connects with Vajrapani. Vajrapani is a figure who is particularly associated, as we have heard, with 'virya' – with energy – not just any old energy, but 'energy in pursuit of the good'.

You could say that energy is the link between your faith – your heart's deepest wish; what you really believe in in the most positive way – and your actions. If you really start contacting your heart's wish, then you want to carry that into action, and the link that does that is virya.

Vajrapani is a figure who appears in Buddhist Tantra. Buddhist Tantra is a sort of current of ideas and practices that arose within the Buddhist tradition about 750 years after the time of the Buddha, and it was subsequently carried over from India into Tibet and Japan. There are a large number of Tantric texts, and Vajrapani is particularly associated with those Tantric texts. According to the story he is the 'guardian' of those texts, and also the 'collector' and 'assembler' of those Tantric texts, so he is known as the 'Lord of Secrets' in some texts.

This Tantric current within Buddhism became very successful. It became a very major part of the Buddhist tradition, mainly, I think, because it had methods for addressing deep levels of consciousness very directly. It used things like mantra, mudra, visualisation. Some of those methods involved mental rehearsal, you could say. Just as top athletes would visualise themselves preparing and then engaging in their event, so male and female Tantric practitioners rehearsed gaining Enlightenment. They enlisted the support, you could say, of their unconscious minds.

So, just as the athletes try to get that message into deeper levels of their consciousness so that automatically, spontaneously, when the starting gun goes they launch into their best possible performance, the Tantric practitioners were trying to get the message of Enlightenment through to deeper and deeper levels of the mind, deeper and deeper levels of consciousness.

I think if you practice the Dharma over a period of time, whenever your practice starts going well you discover that there is this kind of dialogue going on between what you think of as 'you' – sort of 'everyday you', your everyday self – and deeper levels of your being, deeper levels of your consciousness. It's almost like there has to be a kind of collaboration between our everyday selves and the deeper aspects of ourselves.

It is very important to try to pay attention to this, to the messages that we get from those deeper levels – in dream, intuition, meditation, however it may come – and promote that dialogue. We need to really try to listen to what is going on beyond what we are usually aware of, and also to dwell on helpful symbols, because symbols are one of the ways in which we communicate with those deep levels of consciousness, and in which they communicate with us.

So Buddhist Tantra used mental rehearsal, and this mental rehearsal was known as 'taking the goal as the path' in Buddhist Tantra. It was called 'taking the goal as the path' because you imagined yourself as already having achieved the goal of wisdom, compassion and so on. You imagined it as if it were present right now, and you did that repeatedly until eventually, just through that repeated imagining of yourself as you could become – as you potentially are – that became more and more your present reality.

If you were practicing in this way, you could imagine yourself having the good karma to be in the presence of a Buddha, or a great Bodhisattva, say. You could imagine that you'd actually arrived at the level where you were in direct communication with them, and they empowered you.

You could actually imagine yourself having *become* a Buddha – having all the powers of the enlightened mind – and using those powers to help endless living beings... because the Buddhist Tantra was based firmly on the Mahayana, on the Bodhisattva ideal where you are not just concerned with gaining Enlightenment for yourself alone. You see yourself surrounded by suffering, and you really want to help all living beings, but then you think, 'well, as I am at the moment, what can I really do? I hardly understand what life is about – I don't understand what it means to be a human being really – so what I need to do, if I am really going to help, is I need to develop the wisdom and compassion of a Buddha, and *then* I can really be of some use for other people; then I can really be of help.' So the Tantra was very much based on that Bodhisattva ideal.

So you would rehearse that transformed mental state. You would imagine yourself as a Buddha or Bodhisattva. You would see yourself doing what your heart's deepest wish really came down to, which was understanding the nature of things and being able to help other people to understand too, so that they could put an end to the suffering that they caused themselves.

And you might even see the world as a Buddha would see it. You would see it completely transformed, so everything would become beautiful, everything would become rich. It would be as if you were living in a mandala, a sort of beautiful, rich palace. Everything you heard would be like mantra; everything would be transformed, perfect sound.

You would also aim to experience mental states flowing through your mind as though they were thoughts in the mind of a Buddha: completely unchained, completely free, completely ownerless. No grasping; no sticking onto things. No hanging onto them like grim death, as we so often do. You would just allow this flow of loving, compassionate, wise mental states.

So, people would just put themselves into that world. They would rehearse being a Buddha or Bodhisattva.

Now, the principle of mental rehearsal is the same whether you are trying to be a hundred-metre runner or trying to gain Enlightenment. But the kind of transformation that the Tantra – that Buddhism – is trying to accomplish is a lot deeper and more radical

than even a top athlete is trying to achieve. If you are practicing the Dharma, your aim, however long it takes, isn't simply to have more physical speed, more stamina, more precision in your movement. Buddhists who practiced these Tantric methods were aiming to bring about an extraordinary transformation in how they used their minds.

So how do you picture it to yourself – something that really is an extraordinary transformation, a radical transformation of your mind? It's not so easy. It's not so obvious. It's not so simple as just seeing yourself breasting the tape at the end of your hundred metres.

Those deep levels of your mind work in very tangible, concrete ways. They respond to pictures, and to symbols. So you really need to make whatever you are trying to achieve in terms of the Dharma very tangible for yourself. If you just have a sense of, '...what am I trying to do? Well, I'm trying to gain Enlightenment...' actually nothing much will happen. It may be all very good, but it's so vague and intangible that it won't generate much emotional energy. You won't actually be able to get much of yourself behind that kind of thing.

So, what are you *really* trying to do? It's always good to be clarifying this for yourself in terms of your practice: so we're always working to produce *this* particular kind of outcome, *this* particular kind of mental state... we're working on *this* level in order to arrive at *that* better – that more satisfying, more fulfilling mental state – because it will make us happier and have a good effect on those around us.

The more we can make that concrete and clear and see it for ourselves – the more definite we can be – then the more effective our practice will be; the more emotional energy we'll produce.

So, how do you picture, and feel, being Enlightened?

Well, in the early history of Buddhism a lot of people just saw themselves in the presence of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. He had been the teacher who had started the whole tradition, so they would just imagine themselves in his presence, feel what it would be like to have been in the presence of Shakyamuni, and just feel those qualities.

But as time went on, the ways in which people envisioned those enlightened qualities became much more imaginative and they acquired deeper and deeper symbolism. Because of that, in Buddhist Tantric art you find Buddhas of all kinds. You find Buddhas of different colours: they can be green or blue or red or yellow. They can be holding all kinds of symbolic emblems: lotuses, vajras, purbas, all kinds of things. You may find figures with many arms, or many heads.

When you first come across these figures – I know when I first came across them – you think, 'what on earth is that Bodhisattva *doing* with those nine heads, or all those arms?'... [LAUGHTER] ...But whenever you look at a figure like this you have to think, well, they're all designed – well, not designed, because these figures tended to appear

spontaneously out of the depths of people's meditation – but they're all *aimed*, let's say, to help you to develop a particular spiritual quality.

So if you come upon a piece of Buddhist Tantric art and you see some kind of strange figure with so many heads and so many arms and so on, the question you need always to ask yourself is: 'What would I *feel like* if I looked like that?' ... [LAUGHTER]

The first answer may be: 'Well, I'd feel pretty weird if I looked like that.' But if you go further into it the question is: 'What mental state is that form trying to express? What is it trying to communicate? What quality of Enlightenment is it trying to get across?'

So if you have a figure with a tremendous number of arms, say: why would you want all those arms? Well, you'd want all those arms in order to reach out to more and more and more living beings; just to be able to help them in whatever way you could.

So just ask yourself: 'What quality is that figure trying to express?'

Over the centuries a great flowering of these Tantric meditations and visualisations took place. Thousands of these visualisations were produced which enabled people to 'take the goal as the path' – either to imagine themselves being in the presence of a Buddha through visualising that figure, as it were, in front of them, or to imagine themselves *as* a Buddha, through becoming that figure.

But as these thousands of different meditations and figures appeared it became a bit of a jumble – it became really chaotic – so there needed to be some kind of ordering principle for it all. And various ways of ordering these figures appeared.

Particularly there was an organising principle under which all the different figures were arranged into five Buddha families – five different 'kulas', as they were called – each of which had a particular Buddha at its head, and each of which had particular qualities that he embodied.

But earlier on before that system fully developed there was a simpler arrangement where there were just three Buddha families, and these were based on the three main aspects of the Enlightened mind that people were trying to develop. There was 'wisdom' (which is, you could say, almost the distinctive aspect of Buddhism); there was 'compassion'; and there was 'energy in pursuit of the good'.

The central family was the Buddha family, which was associated with 'wisdom'; then you had the Lotus family, which was associated with 'compassion'; and the Vajra family, which was associated with 'energy'. Each family had a host of associations to it and different figures involved with it. Each one had a symbolic Buddha at its head. It had an emblem, such as the lotus or the vajra. It had a colour. It had some particular quality of mundane existence. And also there was a particular type of meditation that was associated with it, on a particular aspect of reality.

In the case of 'energy' (which is what we are concerned with this morning) the symbolic colour was blue, and the archetypal Buddha was called Akshobya, which means 'the imperturbable one'.

And the aspect or mark which is common to all mundane existence which it focused on was 'impermanence' – the fact that everything changes, and just keeps on changing. It is the one thing we can really rely on, the fact that everything changes. Usually we're trying to find one thing which will stay the same which we can rely on. If we just turn things around and rely on the fact that everything changes, then suddenly our lives become so much easier, and the friction between how we think things are and how they really are reduces a lot – and that friction is what we call dukkha, or suffering.

Everything changes; everything is impermanent. That was the main quality on which this family focused. The fact that everything changes is a dynamic quality, and there was a particular meditation – a particular 'samadhi' as it is called – a deep meditation, which you arrived at through really contemplating deeply the fact that everything changes. This meditative state was known as the 'signless' meditation. It was signless because if you see everything as dynamic, if you see everything as a continuing flow, you can never sum it up in any particular concept. Whenever you think you've got it summed up in a concept, it changes, it develops, it moves on.

So there are no concepts which are really applicable to 'how things finally are'. We need to use concepts and labels to help us to live our lives, but if we ever think, 'right, I've got it summed up now: this is how things are; the answer to life, the universe and everything is 49', or whatever – then immediately life transforms again and you find that you are always chasing the game. The thing is constantly moving on. You can never pin down Reality with words and labels.

And the emblem of this family was the vajra. The word 'vajra' has all kinds of meanings in Tantric Buddhism – far more than I could go into now. I have explored some of them in that little booklet on the vajra bell that I wrote recently which is available... going cheap... in the Padmaloka bookshop. I don't know whether to be pleased or slightly disheartened... [LAUGHTER]... Pleased? I'll be pleased. OK... Good idea.

On one level the vajra is just a ritual sceptre that you can hold. Often in Tantric ritual you hold the vajra in your right hand and the vajra bell – a bell with a vajra handle – in your left, and together they symbolise wisdom and compassion perfectly united.

But although the vajra is this piece of metal designed in a particular way, it has all the symbolism of a diamond. And the thing about a diamond is this: it's the hardest thing you can find in nature. A diamond will cut all other stones but it will never be cut itself. So the vajra symbolises a state of mind which is unshakeable; which is imperturbable; which is never affected by anything mundane *at all*.

But as well as having the nature of a diamond, the vajra also has the nature of a thunderbolt. So there is this tremendous thunderbolt energy also incorporated, as it were,

in the vajra. And again, we're talking about something which symbolises states of mind – we have to remember this again and again and again.

So: you have the diamond, and the thunderbolt, and I think in 'Meeting The Buddhas' somewhere I talk about how when I was young you would have this sort of playground riddle about 'what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object?' When you're about eight, you sort of stand there in the playground and you think, 'right, there's an irresistible force.. but there's an immovable object...' and you try to sort of work out what happens. The Tantric answer to that is, well, the two just sort of fuse together and they become the vajra. You have this immovable object which has all the qualities of a diamond – so you have a mental state which is completely immovable, imperturbable – but also it has all the qualities, all that dynamic power and irresistible force, of the thunderbolt.

So the Vajra is irresistible. Completely unstoppable. Nothing mundane can stand against it. It smashes through all hindrances, all obstacles, and particularly all the ignorance that causes us suffering. And at the same time, it is completely stable and unaffected itself.

So, very simply put, this is the main emblem of the Vajra family. And the main Bodhisattva of this family, as we have seen, is called Vajrapani. He is the main embodiment of wisdom and compassion in this family; particularly compassion, because he is a Bodhisattva. And Vajrapani is the holder of the diamond thunderbolt; the holder of the vajra.

So there were these three Buddha families – there was the Buddha family in the middle, and the Lotus family and the Vajra family – but over time the Vajra family rose in importance.

In fact, if you read the history of Buddhist Tantra, it's a bit like reading the history of a Mafia family who manage to get some very powerful armaments sort of smuggled in from somewhere and they gradually just take over some city or other... because the Vajra is such a powerful symbol – such a powerful weapon against ignorance and inertia, spiritually, you could say – that the Vajra family became increasingly central in the Buddhist Tantric tradition. Eventually Akshobya, the Blue Buddha, came to move into the centre of the mandala, and Vairocana and the Buddha family made way and moved into the east.

So most of the major Buddhist figures in the later Buddhist Tantra are associated with the Vajra and the Vajra family.

And similarly, just as the Vajra family rose and rose, Vajrapani too rose from humble beginnings, as it were. He first makes his appearances in the early Buddhist texts as a 'yaksha' – a very powerful nature spirit – maybe a bit like an ogre, although I'm not quite sure what an ogre is, so maybe I won't say that... but, yes, a very powerful nature spirit.

And he quite often appears in the early Buddhist texts as a sort of guardian of the

Buddha. We heard a reading the other night of one story where he appears. There is another Sutta called the Ambatta Sutta, where a young Brahmin man comes to the Buddha and starts questioning him – and at the time you'd already got the beginnings of the caste system which has cast its shadow over India right down to the present day, as Dave was reminding us – so this young Brahmin man feels quite superior to the Buddha because the Buddha is only a 'Kshatriya' – he is only of the warrior caste.

So this young man, Ambatta, keeps making slighting comments about the Buddha for being a Kshatriya, and about the Shakyans that the Buddha comes from. In fact he describes them as 'menials'; a sort of 'low people'.

And the Buddha just answers him very politely and patiently, as Buddhas do... but eventually I think he decides that Ambatta really is causing himself a lot of pain through seeing things in this way. So he says to Ambatta, 'Ambatta, isn't it true that actually your family – your Brahmin family – are originally descended from a Shakyan serving girl?' And Ambatta doesn't answer, because he knows it's true. So he keeps silent. And the Buddha asks him a second time... and Ambatta keeps silent.

The Buddha asks him a third time, and... yes, the tradition seems to be that if you don't answer a question very reasonably put to you by a Buddha even up to a third time, there is some danger that your head may split into pieces... whatever that may mean! So at this point, Ambatta looks up above where the Buddha is, and there is this figure of 'Vajirapani' (as he is called in the Pali Canon) – Vajrapani, this very powerful figure, holding a Vajra, waiting to strike... so Ambatta decides that perhaps he *will* answer the Buddha's question after all.

Now, in a way I find it hard to know what's going on in that story. It may just be that, in a way, Vajrapani symbolises the positive humiliation that some people felt when they came into contact with the Buddha and their pride was shattered by his clarity and by the truth which he totally embodied from head to foot. People would come to the Buddha with all sorts of views and all sorts of positions, and the Buddha is in a sense not taking any position at all. The Buddha is just relating to Ambatta with kindness – but, in a way, if you are standing back from the Buddha, you may find life rather difficult, even though the Buddha is actually being very kind to you.

And at times in the Pali Canon Vajrapani seems to be a sort of guardian of the Buddha – a bit like his 'daemon'; his genius, almost, in the Roman sense of the term. He seems to be a symbol of the vajra-like intelligence of the Buddha, that is going to annihilate the delusion, the wrong views, that cause the suffering of the person who is questioning him.

But although he starts off as this 'yaksha' – this powerful sort of nature spirit – Vajrapani becomes more and more important as Buddhism develops, until eventually he comes to be seen as one of the great Bodhisattvas in the Tantric tradition, along with Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri and so on.

Now, we don't want to take all this too literally. It's not so much that there was – you

know – this sort of nature spirit who in some sort of way got promoted in some kind of celestial hierarchy to get to sit on a lotus in some heavenly world. It's more like there's a sort of current of spiritual energy which starts from the Buddha but expresses itself through different forms; and as that current of energy takes forms that people find more and more helpful to them in their development, so that figure becomes more and more important.

And Vajrapani as a Bodhisattva takes on several different forms. He's got a very peaceful form – we've got an example, thanks to Matthew, on the shrine – and often the peaceful form is quite a light blue colour. So he's very young – maybe sixteen years old – very radiant, and often in a very relaxed posture – what is sometimes called 'royal ease' – just sort of leaning, in a completely easy way.

We often think of energy as something when you have to screw yourself up and 'find your energy'. It is very good to just look at the peaceful form of Vajrapani, because he's completely relaxed. He's holding the Vajra; he's holding a lotus on which the Vajra is – so there's all that power, all that energy there, but it is being expressed through a state of mind where there is no tension, no forced, willed effort whatsoever. It is just perfectly relaxed.

So we have the peaceful form of Vajrapani. But very often the form of Vajrapani that you come upon is a wrathful form, and there are quite a number of these; Vajrapani has outer, inner, and secret forms. But unfortunately we only have time for the outer one this morning...

So, I want to look at the common wrathful form of Vajrapani.

Like all these figures, this form of Vajrapani appears in a vast blue sky. And then within that there is a lotus flower – because all these symbolic Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have grown out of the mud of mundane existence into the sunlight of Enlightenment – and then there is a sun-disc. Sometimes one foot of Vajrapani is on a moon-disc and the other is on a sun-disc, but more usually there is a sun-disc on which the figure stands, and then finally the figure of Vajrapani himself.

So he is a very powerful male figure and he is dark blue in colour. Dark blue is often associated with wisdom in Buddhist Tantra. And he is very wrathful-looking indeed. He looks really ferocious. He has glaring eyes – three of them! – including one in the middle of his forehead symbolising a higher wisdom: seeing into the nature of reality. He also has tusks, or fangs. And in his right hand he is holding a golden vajra as if he was about to hurl it.

As I said, one of the qualities of the vajra is that it always destroys its target, and it returns automatically to the hand of the person who threw it. And again, we have to think of this diamond thunderbolt not as a piece of metal but as reflecting a mental quality – something which is capable of annihilating, of smashing through all our suffering, all our delusions about how things are, so that we see things as they really are.

Then with his other hand sometimes he is holding a vajra bell, sometimes a wheel (which symbolises the Buddha's teaching), but very often his hand is empty and he is just making a symbolic gesture of warding off enemies of the Dharma.

So, if we imagine ourselves a bit into this figure, and think, 'what would I *feel like* if I looked like that?' then we would be in this mental state where there is tremendous power and energy in pursuit of the good, in pursuit of the Dharma. We are capable of seeing through to how things really are, of smashing through delusions. There is a tremendous compassion. Why do you want to wield this vajra? You are not just wielding it for yourself. You see so much suffering in the world – and yes, sometimes when you see suffering you just have a simple, gentle heart response, but at other times you see that suffering needs to be – you know – people need to be rescued from suffering by quite forceful means. Sometimes you need to really go and stand shoulder to shoulder with people who are suffering; you need to really stand up for them.

You can feel a tremendous spiritual impatience about the fact that there is so much suffering in the world – and that spiritual impatience comes out very strongly indeed, so that it may even look like an angry state – but Vajrapani isn't angry in the ordinary sense at all. His heart is constantly compassionate. He has taken this form just because it is the most effective form in which to help as many people as possible.

And with this mudra of warding off enemies, it is as if you are in a mental state in which nothing negative can come anywhere near you. You are just so positive that even the slightest beginnings of negative mental states just kind of look at you and think, 'oh... I won't bother... I just won't even try!' [LAUGHTER]

And he is also wearing a number of skulls and bone ornaments – and of course these are associated with death, and they remind us of impermanence, which the Vajra family is associated with – but they are also, I think, about the death of limited ideas of ourselves. It is very often our limiting, limited ideas which prevent us from finding more energy. We keep thinking, 'oh, I can't... I'm not the sort of person who does that...' and we keep telling ourselves that. So every time a bit of energy comes up to go in that direction, that energy is congealed and flattened back down again.

So Vajrapani represents a state of mind in which you've burst through all those limiting ideas about who you are and what life is about, and as a result a lot of energy has been freed up.

And then, also, he's almost naked – so, again, there's a sort of spiritual openness there. He is not hiding anything whatsoever; he's in a state of mind where he is prepared to completely be, as it were, who he is. He may just be wearing a tiger skin, which in the Tantra is associated with overcoming anger, overcoming hatred.

And quite often he is wreathed in snakes. There is a whole symbolism about Vajrapani that I haven't quite got worked out, about nagas, as they are called in the Buddhist

tradition – sort of serpent-like creatures – and garudas, who are great, mythical, eagle-like birds. In the Buddhist tradition, or texts, these nagas and garudas are enemies. But Vajrapani, in the early texts, is called the 'Lord of the Nagas,' and he has these serpents. But then in some of his inner and secret forms he takes on the form of the garuda. There is one form where he turns into a flight of the garudas, like a sort of squadron of these great eagle figures... and sometimes they are represented holding Nagas in their beaks... so I'm not sure which side he's on, really. He seems to be spanning that divide between those two symbolic figures – the heights and the depths.

And then Vajrapani has a great, protuberant stomach: there is something very powerful and solid about him. So, again, your mental state if you become Vajrapani is this tremendously powerful, solid, 'immovable-by-anything-mundane' state of mind.

And then he is stepping – or perhaps I should say 'stomping' – to the right. In some versions he is trampling a couple of figures underneath his feet, who are understood to represent ignorance and craving. So you are in such a wise, compassionate state of mind that ignorance and craving are held completely under your feet. You don't even notice them: they're not there any more – they're sort of down under your feet – you don't see them when you look around at all.

And all around him is this great halo of flames; the flames of transcendental wisdom.

So, there is a lot we could say about this figure... but time is a bit limited...

...But what would happen if you were to mentally rehearse being in the presence of a figure like that – perhaps eventually even *becoming* a figure like that – in Tantric meditation, day after day, year after year, decade after decade?

Well, although as I've said he is described as a 'wrathful' figure, you wouldn't become 'very angry', in the ordinary sense. Vajrapani does have the loving, compassionate heart of a Bodhisattva. He is just manifesting all this energy because he cares very deeply about all living beings. In one text he is described as 'grown out of the root of compassion' – so he has just taken on this powerful, wrathful form to help living beings.

So what happens if you just keep concentrating on this figure and reciting his mantra? In a way it is quite simple – you just develop more and more energy in pursuit of the good; in pursuit of wisdom.

So if day after day you were to see that figure and to recite, 'Om Vajrapani Hum,' – or sometimes the mantra is, 'Om Vajrapani Hum Phet,' – or if you are a Tibetan you recite, 'Om Benzapani Hum,' and 'Om Benzapani Hum Pey', because the Tibetans tend to sort of mangle their Sanskrit... if you just keep doing this, if you keep reciting the mantra, seeing the figure, well, you do liberate a tremendous amount of energy.

And in a way, Vajrapani stands for both the energy that you need – he gives you the energy that you need – in order to focus, to break through, ignorance and so forth, so that

you penetrate into how things really are; you penetrate into the heart of reality.

But he also represents the tremendous energy that is liberated when that breakthrough happens; as if when you finally make contact with things as they really are, a whole lot of delusions and a whole lot of limiting ideas and ways of being just fall away, and suddenly you have much more energy available to you.

So if you just focus on Vajrapani in this way, increasingly you have that message communicated to you and it helps you to overcome all the hindrances to your energy flowing freely.

Very often in Buddhism it is said that there are three kinds of hindrances to free-flowing energy. You could just call them three kinds of laziness, I suppose... although we wouldn't think of them all as obviously lazy.

Firstly there is what you could call the 'laziness of laziness'... I've recently been staying in Cambridge, where I was at university many, many years ago – and when I was at university I was basically a hippy dropout; I did very little work for three years. And I remember there was one day where I was invited to have lunch with the master of the college that I was in, and he was a very distinguished historian and spent most of his time researching, but he did try to get to know the members of his college... so at least once in three years he would sort of invite us to lunch. And it was one o'clock, I think. And I overslept... [LAUGHTER]... yeah... I spent a lot of my three years just... particularly... lying sort of gazing at the ceiling looking at pretty patterns and things... So, yes, I didn't manage to make this one o'clock lunch...

...So that's the 'laziness of laziness'.

But there is also what's called the 'laziness of busy-ness' – which, from the Buddhist point of view, is not doing anything to actualise the potential which we have as human beings. If you've turned up in this world and you're not doing anything at all to help it – if you're really just filling up your time – however busily you may be whizzing about, from the Buddhist point of view that is laziness. If you're just... whatever... playing a few computer games, doing a bit of retail therapy... I think sometimes you can almost have a sense that... well, if I look back at my life I've sometimes wasted bits of it just feeling that this wasn't quite the 'real thing' – almost as if this was the rehearsal for life, and the real thing was somehow going to happen 'later'. There can be something of that sometimes.

So if you just drift through life, just doing nice things, from the Buddhist point of view that is the 'laziness of busy-ness' – because we all have so much potential. You may even be doing a great deal of very hard work, but if really it is just for your own egotistical reasons, not for any wider or higher goal, then from the Buddhist point of view we might have to send Vajrapani round to have a little word with you. [LAUGHTER]

...So, there is the 'laziness of laziness' and there is the 'laziness of busy-ness', but then there is also the 'laziness of self pity and despair' – maybe 'discouragement' is a good

word.

I think very often people take up the Buddhist path and they practice meditation and they work on themselves, but after you've been at it for a while you begin to realise that this 'gaining Enlightenment' lark is actually going to be a bit more difficult than you realised. I'm not quite sure why that is, partly, because in the Dhammapada the Buddha says somewhere that gaining Enlightenment is like defeating a thousand men in battle a thousand times.... now, according to my maths that's about a million battles, which is quite a lot really.

But I think there is always a tendency... well, we start off not really knowing ourselves very well, or very deeply, very often... and we practice hard, and although we are changing we don't always see how we are changing because we're too close to ourselves, and so we get a bit discouraged. You just think, 'well, I don't know if I'm going to be able to change or get very far,' and that can be very insidious. I think actually most British practitioners probably suffer from it, occasionally at least.

And what happens as a result is, because you're a bit discouraged, you don't stop practicing but you just sort of go through the motions a little bit. You're still doing a bit of meditation, you're still coming along to the Centre now and then, but somehow you don't quite believe that it's really going to work. You don't deeply feel, 'yes, I'm on the right track – if I just keep making the effort that I'm making, this will all take me to states that are really fulfilling and satisfied.'

Because of that, you don't really give things your best shot. You don't really put energy into it. And as a result of that, your practice doesn't work – so it can even become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. You feel a bit discouraged; you don't really make the effort, although you still look as if you are doing it. You still are, to some extent, but because you are going through the motions it's not really transformative, and as a result of that you can say, 'well, there we are, I was right after all – I'll never get anywhere with the Dharma.'

So, that's the 'laziness of discouragement.'

And often, I think, if your practice isn't going well, there's an element of this in it – that you've got a bit discouraged somewhere. You can even... I certainly have, at times over the years, had this little voice that says, 'well, yes, I do believe that meditation works, I do believe that the Dharma works – but not quite for me.' It seems to be quite common. But these days if that voice crops up at all, in me or in somebody else, I kind of want to say, 'what makes you think you're so special? Yes, the Dharma *has* worked for so many thousands of people over the last two and half thousand years... what is it that makes me think that I'm so special, and my particular difficulties and psychology and so on are so particularly complex and intransigent that I won't be able to sort it out?' I realise in myself it's a kind of pride, really. I'm making myself this very special person for whom the Dharma won't work – you know – I will be the one who defeats Shakyamuni and all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, through my particular difficulties!

So, it's good to be aware of that possibility.

And visualising Vajrapani, or bearing him in mind, enables you to develop the opposite of those three things – of the 'laziness of laziness', the 'laziness of busy-ness', and the 'laziness of discouragement'. Just holding Vajrapani in mind, you find, generates virya – it generates energy in pursuit of the good. It stirs your energy up.

And if you stir your energy, then you find that a number of positive qualities start to appear. Again, Buddhism loves lists... There is a list of five aspects of positive energy, and I'm just going to finish by looking briefly at these, because Vajrapani seems to embody all of them.

So, firstly... Vajrapani embodies the energy which is described as being like 'putting on armour'.

There is an energy that you develop with your spiritual practice that is a sort of defence against unskilful mental states, against unskilful volitions. If you manage, say, on retreat, to get into meditation, to clarify your Dharma practice, then very often when you first come back, for a little while at least it's as if – well – difficult things happen but they don't affect you, they don't reach in and touch you. It is as if you've got a sort of aura around you; you've got a sort of positive energy which just throws off those things...

...Vajrapani is a bit like a sort of spiritual snow-plough. He's sort of storming towards Enlightenment and anything negative is just knocked aside. So he embodies that sort of positive energy that is like armour, that protects you from the unskilful.

Then secondly, he embodies the energy that consists in applied effort.

In a way this just means keeping on going and keeping on trying. Over the years I have seen Sangharakshita conduct a lot of ordination ceremonies, and there is a point in the ordination ceremony when the last words of the Buddha are quoted: 'With mindfulness, strive on.' And quite often at that point Sangharakshita said, 'that's all you have to do – you just have to keep being aware and making an effort, and if you can run along the spiritual path, great, but if not, you walk along it... if need be, you just crawl along it... but you just keep making an effort, you just keep doing what you can do, with whatever mental state you're in.'

I think sometimes we feel we're 'on' the spiritual path when we are in certain mental states and we're 'off it' when we're in others; but part of the trick of the spiritual life is that whatever mental state you're in – rather than thinking, 'that's not a spiritual state at all,' and almost hiding from yourself the fact that you're in it – just to acknowledge the whole of yourself. And wherever you find yourself, whatever state you're in, you just make an effort. I sometimes say, well, even if you're feeling suicidal, you just make the effort to be depressed rather than suicidal!... [LAUGHTER]... and if you do that, if whatever states you find yourself in you just keep working with them, everything over time becomes

transformed.

So this is applied effort, and recalling Vajrapani helps you to keep making that steady effort. There is something very relentless about Vajrapani. You don't get the impression that he meditates for three days and then kind of has a couple of days where he doesn't get around to it... you know... he just keeps on keeping on.

Then thirdly he embodies the virya that doesn't despair; that doesn't become daunted; that doesn't become discouraged; that doesn't think, 'oh, I'll never be able to change'.

Whenever you try and do something worthwhile, whether it is just working directly on your mind or trying to do something about the state of the world, you always discover at some point that what you have taken on is harder than you expected it to be. There is always a point where you think, 'oh, if only I'd realised what I was taking on I wouldn't have gone this way.'

But, in a way, those are the real spiritual challenges. So Vajrapani, when he gets to that point, just digs deeper – he doesn't give up. He just thinks, 'well, ok, this is just the negative mental state that I'm in at the moment: I don't have to identify with it. Yes, I have to be aware of how I am, but...' – it's as if he just takes stock and then regroups and returns to the attack.

So he represents an energy that doesn't despair; that believes that wherever you are in your life, that is a workable place from which to move towards Enlightenment. There is always something that you can be doing, whatever position you are in.

And along with that is the fourth kind of virya, which is the energy that doesn't turn back.

Whenever you practice the Dharma, in a way the commitment that you're making is always to the unknown. Gaining Enlightenment is a leap in the dark. It is not like doing something that you already know about. It is not quite the same as anything that you've ever done. You can't know what it is going to be like. You don't know what you are going to become, what you are going to turn into, as you practice the Dharma. In that way, it's quite magical.

One of the things that I've really loved and rejoiced in about being involved with so many people in the Order and around the FWBO is that you watch people turning into something that they could never have foreseen. You may find somebody who starts off quite shy and unconfident, and a few years down the track – you know – they're standing up, perhaps as I'm doing, and giving a talk to a whole lot of people on a men's event. And they could never have imagined themselves doing that when they started. They couldn't have seen it at all. So it is really quite magical.

So that's the positive side. But also at times, when you keep practicing, you discover difficult things about yourself that you didn't realise, that you could never quite have imagined. You find things about the spiritual life that you don't like – that you didn't

realise, perhaps, were involved in it. You are confronted with all sorts of situations, and at that point, when you really need that sort of Vajrapani energy that doesn't turn back, it requires quite a lot of 'heroic energy'. There may be times when you need to sort of take a spiritual stand – as if you sort of plant your standard and you say, 'for the sake of all living beings, I am not going to back down in my quest for Reality, in my quest to become a more loving and kind and aware human being – even though it's extremely difficult.'

So, that is the energy that doesn't turn back. I think it's quite important to make some contact with that kind of energy, because I think the way society is currently in the West we're almost fed ideas that life should be quite easy, quite simple. What we are given through adverts and so on is that, 'yes, your life is going to be easy and it's going to work out, and if it doesn't work out, it must be somebody's fault – there must be somebody we can sue!' So I think that gives us an unrealistic expectation of life.

Sometimes life is extremely difficult – sometimes even practicing the Dharma is extremely difficult – and we need to find that energy that isn't going to turn back, or at least is only going to make a sort of strategic retreat in order to find a place to go forward from again.

So, that's the energy that doesn't turn back – and then lastly there is the energy that is never satisfied.

Vajrapani doesn't rest on his laurels, or his lotus. He is not going to rest, in fact, until we are all Enlightened; until we are all free from suffering; until we are all completely happy and fulfilled.

It's easy sometimes to think, 'yes, I did really well on that retreat two months ago...' but now you're two months on. And constantly, in a smooth, steady sort of way, we need to be thinking, 'ok, I have developed this quality this far – I never thought I would, maybe, but here I am – but maybe I can even go a little bit further; I can just take it the next step.' A lot of Dharma practice is just finding out, 'what is the next step?' – you know, just the next thing that you can do. There always is a next step, even if it's just three inches forwards – there is always a next step that you can take.

So these are the kinds of energy that Vajrapani can help us to develop: the energy that's like putting on armour; the energy of applied effort; the energy that doesn't despair, that isn't discouraged; the energy that doesn't turn back; and the energy that is never satisfied.

And it's very important to understand that this energy isn't a sort of willed, forced, grit-your-teeth effort, and it doesn't necessarily involve being 'busy' twenty four hours a day. It isn't just dashing about. But it does involve producing the qualities of a sort of 'spiritual warrior'.

I think at the moment in some aspects of the FWBO the 'heroic ideal' is taking a bit of a pounding. And I think there is a naive way of trying to be a hero and a warrior, that

doesn't work – and I tried to address some of the pitfalls of this in a talk that I gave a couple of years ago to the Order, which is, again, available from the Padmaloka Bookshop. It is called: 'Here Be Dragons: Disasters, Dilemmas and Dead-Ends on the Spiritual Path'. (<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM584>) So if that sounds interesting, do have a look at it, because it will make you aware of... there are right and wrong ways to set about being a spiritual warrior, and practicing the heroic ideal.

So, yes, it isn't at all about a forced sort of mental effort towards an idea that you set yourself, where your ego will feel very satisfied with who you are. That is nothing to do with it, really. And it is always worth remembering that peaceful form of Vajrapani – it's very relaxed, quite contemplative and completely at ease. It is almost as if we need to put together the peaceful and wrathful forms of Vajrapani to get a balanced sense of practicing the Dharma. You can sort of screw up your energy and force yourself ahead for a while, but that's not usually sustainable in the long run, and I think in practicing the Dharma what we need is sort of sustainable development. We need really to be tapping into deep sources of energy in ourselves which really will sustain us in the long haul of the spiritual life.

And in a way that energy comes from two sources, I think. It comes from a deep understanding of how things are, and then a deep care about yourself and about other living beings.

So there is an understanding of how things are; a sort of wisdom aspect. And there is one aspect of the wrathful figure that I described that I didn't mention and didn't dwell on, and that is the fact that this great, muscular, powerful hero is made of light. His body is hollow. You can see right through it. And that has a very strong message which, again, communicates itself to you if you keep reflecting on the figure. In fact the whole figure is giving us a message about the nature of Reality. Nothing is fixed. Nothing is solid. Everything is energy. Everything is dynamic – everything is an interplay of energy. We are essentially energy. There is nothing fixed about us at all. And as I said, if you see that, if you really see that deeply, that releases a great deal of energy.

So, as I said, sometimes we think, 'oh, I'll never change this or that,' but the more you explore your actual experience in meditation, you don't find anything fixed or anything that can't be changed – anything that isn't changing all the time. You just find a dynamic flow of energy.

If you really see that deeply, it is a bit like the spiritual equivalent of splitting the atom: there is this tremendous sort of release of energy, because there is a huge amount of our energy just tied up with this preoccupation with ourselves in the wrong way. If we see through it, then energy is released. And that experience of what we see cannot be described in words. We come into this meditation on 'signlessness', which just annihilates all our concepts in relation to how things really and finally are. But although we can't describe it in words, it is entirely clear to us in a way that, when we lived in the world of words and concepts, things never were so clear.

So the vajra that Vajrapani wields smashes all our mental confusion, all the ignorance which arises from taking our ideas about Reality for Reality itself.

I find this image of peaceful and wrathful Vajrapani a very helpful one. It helps me in exploring myself in meditation; it helps me when I'm looking at the difficulties in the world; and it gives me a picture of my potential as a human being.

As I said, all those pictures in Buddhist art, in a way they are all just pictures of you. They are all just pictures of your potential; of different aspects of it that you have as a human being. And one potential that we all have is the potential to liberate tremendous amounts of spiritual energy – the potential to develop energy in pursuit of the good – so that we carry our heart's wish, our deepest beliefs, what we would really like to see for ourselves in the world, out into action.

And, in a way, this is the way to contacting more energy. It isn't to force and sort of make yourself be more energetic. That doesn't really work. The key to it is to contact our faith, to contact what we most deeply believe. When you're in contact with that, you find energy automatically just flows into whatever you're doing.

If we also take on the message of the Vajra family that everything is impermanent, then not only have we contacted our heart's wish and have a sense of what we would really like for ourselves and for the world; we also realise that time is limited and that we don't have forever in order to try to bring it about.

So if we put those things together, then we have a quality that Vajrapani embodies, of making real effort – heartfelt, compassionate effort – knowing that time is short – to make the best possible use of life.

When you are in touch with that sense of the purpose and preciousness of your own life, and the lives of all human beings, as I said, energy just naturally flows. You don't have to force it. It naturally overcomes the laziness of lying about; the laziness of busyness.

I sometimes think that samsara – unsatisfactory existence – is, in a way, just taking the line of least resistance through life. It is quite easy, really, just to go where life takes you, but it takes a real decision and a lot of energy to take your life down a different track: to decide what you are going to become as a human being and how you would like the world around you to be, and to work towards that.

If you can – if you can develop that clear sense of purpose, contact that real 'heart-wish' and a sense of what you can achieve as a human being, although it's going to be difficult along the way – if you can do that, for yourself and for other people, well then you'll naturally just pick up the vajra – the diamond thunderbolt – that state of mind which is imperturbable but also very powerful, and has a very powerful effect.

And you will use that vajra to liberate yourself and those you love from suffering.



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