



Dharma Ocean Foundation

The Training and the Path
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OVERVIEW

The Spirituality of the Body

Dharma Ocean is a community of meditators, in Colorado, North America, and around the world, following the path of embodied spirituality. Dharma Ocean is a non-monastic, householder based lineage, a community of householder yogins and yoginis, who prioritize the practice of Somatic Meditation in their lives. In the approach of this lineage, the unfolding of the human person through the many stages of life, and his or her spiritual development, are not two separate things; they are one and the same. In other words, to become fully and completely human and to attain spiritual realization are the very same thing.

This means that the arenas of spiritual practice and everyday life are also not separate. In contrast to many conventional approaches, for us the spiritual journey does not involve distancing oneself from “samsara,” from all that is physical, worldly, impure, and problematic; quite to the contrary, it is a process of deeper and deeper entry into those very domains of our existence. We discover that it is precisely within the interior “space” of those aspects of our fully embodied, ordinary, human lives that the most important discoveries occur and our true spiritual journey can unfold.

In this lineage, we emphasize the body as the ground of the spiritual journey because it is only in the body that we are able to find the full measure of our deepest person, our true humanity, and our ultimate spiritual fulfillment. Uniquely, in the body we are able to meet our own experience in a pure and naked way. And, as we know from the somatic psychologies of our time, it is only that kind of direct, unmediated experience that is able to bring about deep and lasting transformation.

Somatic Meditation

Though the path of Somatic Meditation that we follow is secular in nature, it has deep and ancient roots in the Vajrayana Buddhism of India, Tibet, and elsewhere in Asia. Put simply, the tantric approach of Somatic Meditation takes our Soma—our

body—as the fundamental arena of meditation practice. Rather than trying to develop meditation through our thinking mind in a “top-down” process, as is the case with most contemporary approaches, Somatic Meditation involves a bottom-up process, wherein we connect with the inherent, self-existing wakefulness that is already present within the body itself. In contrast to conventional approaches which emphasize entry through the application of deliberate, imposed techniques, Somatic Meditation develops a meditative consciousness that is accessed through the feelings, sensations, somatic intuition, and felt sense of the body itself. We are simply trying to tune into the basic, primordial awareness of the body. Put in Buddhist terms, the human body, as such, is already and always abiding in the meditative state—the domain of awakening—and we are just trying to gain entry into that.

Unless we are able to make room for the direct, unmediated experience of our body as it is, without manipulation or distortion, then deep, lasting, ultimate transformation is unable to occur. This helps us understand the curious fact that many people, after sometimes decades of practicing top-down meditation methods, will just give up meditating because they find that the ultimate transformation they were looking for has not happened.

For all the benefits of top-down meditation, there is always an element of a conscious agenda, a subtle if largely unconscious culling of what comes up, and a prioritizing of some kinds of experience over others. Hence, the ego stays in control. This freezes our development; it lands us in what John Welwood calls “spiritual bypassing.” We are unable to grow. We are bypassing our actual life and therefore the opportunity for endless spiritual maturation that is in us. When we let what we *think* should happen override our body’s imperative of what actually needs to happen, we are turning away from the opportunity to become fully and completely human in this life; we are turning away from the highest spiritual realization.

Training Mandalas

The Vajrayana ancestry of Somatic Meditation is marked by many different somatic methods and practices, and several distinct territories of somatic spiritual development. Dharma Ocean draws on this rich heritage and offers training in several areas, the “training mandalas” described below. Each of the training mandalas is also referred to as a “yana” or “vehicle,” a Buddhist term denoting a body of distinct inspirations and practices, aiming to develop particular spiritual/neurological capacities that we are trying to achieve over the course of our journey through practicing in that mandala. Each of the training mandalas leads us deeper and deeper into our spiritual embodiment. At a certain point, we see that the entire somatic journey to full realization involves nothing other than becoming more and more fully embodied, somatically present, and identified with our corporeal human incarnation and its experience.

1. The Ground Yana: Here, we are learning how to enter into the interior experience of the body, explore what is going on there, and surrender into the “groundless ground” of the Soma that is the foundation of our human life. Training in the Ground Yana involves learning and practicing the some two dozen somatic protocols that form the basis of all the other training mandalas and the entire Dharma Ocean path.

2. The Meditation Yana: Once we gain entry into the inner space of the Soma, we see the limitless possibilities of openness, awareness, and experience that reside there. But typically we have a very hard time “staying with it”; without meaning to, we tend to jump right back into our thinking mind, back into our disembodiment. In the Meditation Yana, through the practice of sitting meditation, we train our minds to be less impulsive in response to thoughts and we cultivate and deepen the experience of pure awareness within our state of being. The particular form of meditation we teach, drawing on the great awareness traditions of India, Tibet, and East Asia, is what we call “the Somatic Practice of Pure Awareness.” It is similar to “silent illumination” in Ch’an, Shikantaza or “just sitting” in Zen, and “abiding in the

natural state” in Mahamudra and Dzogchen, except that it is more explicitly and consistently somatic in nature.

3. The Yana of Somatic Descent: Even in Ch’an, Zen, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen, there may still be a tendency toward disembodiment. Without quite realizing it, we might visualize and aim for a meditative state that is empty of content, devoid of the experiences of birth and death that run through our lives. In the third yana, we bring our meditative awareness fully into the density, the energy, and the eventfulness of our body. In this tantric approach to meditation, we begin to see that everything that bursts forth from the empty space of our basic Soma, “the natural state,” is the energy of awareness, its radiance, and its expressions. This not only returns us to “samsara” with new eyes, but it helps us realize there never was any samsara to begin with, just the enlightened manifestations of our own awakened state.

4. Mahayana: In the fourth yana, we refine our embodiment and our somatic awareness further; we begin to tap into the subtle warmth, tenderness, and wisdom of the heart. Through embodied bodhicitta (or *awakening heart*) practices, we discover that the heart, as the organ of wisdom and compassion within our Soma, beholds all people and all of life as they are, in and of themselves and from their own side. This is simply the heart’s natural way of regarding everything, once the ego-based veils of conceptual thinking are relinquished. And we come to realize that to behold things within the heart’s territory is to love them selflessly and unconditionally.

5. The Vajrayana: In our journey to the complete embodiment of spiritual realization, there are obviously going to be many impediments and blockages getting in the way. The most difficult of these “obscurations” and “obstacles” are what we term today “traumas.” These are unconscious emotional assumptions and beliefs about the nature of ourselves, other people, and the world. These unconscious attitudes and beliefs, responses to overwhelmingly painful experiences, were laid down through our entire life, beginning at least from birth, and they skew our perception of everything. Because they are unconscious, generally it is very difficult to see them and address them. We are talking here not only about the major incapacitating traumas that may be active in us, but also about the hundreds and

perhaps thousands of insults to our person that were so painful that we could not fully process the experiences when they occurred. In the Vajrayana, we turn directly to work with these obstructing, traumatic patterns, bringing them to consciousness through the practice and learning to fully inhabit the painful experiences, thus resolving them. This Vajrayana trauma work releases a huge amount of energy; our awareness opens up further and further, and over time we develop the capacity to open and make room for the vastness of life that is our human birthright.

In order to take up Vajrayana training, practitioners need a strong grounding in each of the first four yantras or training mandalas. That grounding provides the prerequisite for being accepted as a Vajrayana student.

There are several reasons for this. For one thing, the Vajrayana practices are “advanced” in the sense that it is assumed that practitioners are well practiced in being in the body (1st Yana), the practice of Pure Awareness (2nd Yana), meditating in a way that is somatically present to our relative experience (3rd Yana) and practicing with tremendous tenderness and sensitivity to others and a commitment to their welfare (4th Yana). The Vajrayana practices are going to build on that foundation of the first four yantras. In addition, the Vajrayana does stir up a great deal of our subterranean garbage for recycling. Only a good grounding in the first four yantras gives us the stability and the confidence to handle what comes up in an open and creative way.

6. The Yana of Life Itself: In the final yana, we engage in what is called “the return.” This sixth yana is not really a separate training mandala, because it is the fruition of all the training we have been carrying out through the whole previous journey we have been making. Having developed an initial acceptance and openness toward all situations and emotions, and to all the people we meet in life, we now need to take that unconditional openness further. In this yana, we need to let go of all our reference points—especially those of our understanding, our practices, and our experiences of the past five yantras—and enter the practice of surrendering into everyday life without reservation and without hesitation. We use the challenges of being alive, moment by moment, as occasions to let go further and further into the “what is” of ordinary reality. Here, finally, we have reached the full measure of our

embodiment; this is spiritual realization in the tantric journey of Somatic Meditation.

WAYS TO ENTER FURTHER INTO THE SOMATIC LINEAGE

There are many ways that practitioners make their initial connection with the somatic teachings of this lineage. For example, you might see a Dharma Ocean ad in a magazine and feel a sense of immediate recognition and connection and go from there. You might search “meditating with the body” or “somatic meditation” and, finding the Dharma Ocean website, begin to listen to some of the free talks and guided practices found there. Or, perhaps you hear a podcast or interview, read an article or book, or discover one of the Sounds True audio programs. Or perhaps a friend tells you about Dharma Ocean. But then what? How do you enter further in?

At that point, there are many gates into the deeper world of the somatic training we offer. Perhaps you participate in a Dharma Ocean online course, or you begin to practice with one of the audio programs at home, setting aside time everyday for your somatic practice and entering into the training in that way. Or maybe you take an audio program into solitary retreat and spend a week or two with the practices. Some people can go very far and very deep in just that way, long before they are able to meet a Dharma Ocean teacher or are able to avail themselves of in-person training opportunities.

You might also connect with a Dharma Ocean sangha or practice group in your area and begin to explore these teachings with others. Or you might attend a talk, weekend, or retreat where you live. Or, again, you might decide to come to Crestone for one of our week-long up to month-long programs there.

HOW TO BECOME A MEMBER OF THE DHARMA OCEAN COMMUNITY

Although we are an inspired and vibrant community, and although there is a deep caring for one another, Dharma Ocean is not an organized religion. We are a large and diffuse community without any definite boundaries, but one linked by a common inspiration toward the body, the practice of somatic meditation, and a

common love of life. There is no “signing on the dotted line” or any series of requirements for you to be part of our community of somatic practitioners. Simply by connecting with the somatic teachings, you are already a member of this lineage and the flame of this lineage is already beginning to burn within you. How you want to position yourself in relation to your other fellow practitioners is entirely up to you.

You may want to hang out on the periphery for a long time, making the somatic journey alone, perhaps attending programs occasionally. This is the retreat style of Milarepa and the other great meditators of our lineage: solitary, self-contained, and noble. Or you may wish to be part of the day-to-day community wherever you live, connecting with your sangha sisters and brothers in person and also through the online courses and trainings that we offer. Because we are a lineage of householder practitioners, most of us are deeply involved in our daily lives, our relationships, families, and work. Dharma Ocean’s online offerings honor the spiritual way of the householder and offer a profound way to connect. Finally, you may wish to come into the center of the mandala of our community, working with our leadership and senior teachers and lineage holders to create programs, nourish our community life, and spread the somatic lineage to those thirsty for it.

In fact, most sangha members, including our most senior teachers and meditation instructors, cycle through these different ways of being in sangha at different times, according to their individual inspirations and needs. We often compare our community members to comets. Sometimes we circle very close to the Sun, the “center of the mandala” as we say, pulled very close by our longing and devotion, and energized by intense training with our mentors and sangha peers; then swooping by, we catapult out into space, the teachings within us, and we explore on our own. Perhaps we disappear from sight for a long time— maybe even years—and then when we feel it is right, we circle around and come in close once more. In Dharma Ocean there is no one way to do anything; one size does not and cannot fit all or even two individual practitioners. The only rule is that of our own human heart. As a member of our community, you are called only to trust your heart on your journey and to help others do the same.

Meditation Instructors

If after attending the Winter Meditation Intensive (Meditation Yana), you want to continue on the path, it is especially important to have support on your journey. A group of senior practitioners within our lineage has offered themselves as meditation instructors (MI), or mentors. The primary role of the MI is to open themselves to your state of being and to see and receive you as you are. They are there to listen and respond in ways that will be helpful to you at that moment.

An MI can meet with you in person or via phone or online video chat in some mutually agreed upon way, regularly or on an as-needed basis. He or she can assist you to figure out how to continue to engage with the teachings and practices, and help you through the rough spots. Any time you come to a program, you will have an MI available to you automatically, but it is nice to have somebody there in an ongoing way to connect with as the need arises.

The meditation instructors have undergone and continue to undergo specific, intensive training to help them be there for you in a selfless, open, and objective way. All of us need someone like this in our journey to be “for us.” After a certain point, many of us have an MI who plays this role for them.

Importantly, though, your sangha sisters and brothers will also play the role of mentor for you, and you will do the same for them. We are an eye-level community; this means that each of us has critical insights to offer the others, as well as the acceptance, openness, and encouragement they so much need; and we ourselves need the very same things from them. The “eye-level relationship” is sangha-wide and includes everybody, from the most beginning person up to the senior-most lineage holders. We are all here to help each other on the journey and to receive that very same help in return. While we do have an organizational and teaching structure, at the same time, it is just a convenience; fundamentally, we are all making the very same journey. We are all sisters and brothers to each other; and we are all the same: in essence, nobody is “above.”

BECOMING A DHARMA OCEAN TEACHER AND LINEAGE HOLDER

When you enter into this lineage, even on your very first day, the way is open for you to become a Dharma Ocean teacher and, if you want, a lineage holder in this tradition. The only requirement is that you are willing to undergo the full training we have to offer and open yourself to the connection, communication and love of this community and your teachers. The journey to becoming a lineage holder requires a very great deal from each of us, particularly in terms of letting go of our self-centered approach. The Dharma Ocean community really does aspire to lead the world out from chaos and, to do this, we need to become extraordinarily open, selfless, and committed to relieving suffering wherever we find it.

COMMITMENTS

When you commit yourself to the Dharma Ocean lineage, as mentioned, you are not joining up with an organized religion. Instead, you are connecting yourself with the mindstream of this lineage, which is nothing other than the energy of Life itself. You are joining a community of like-minded souls who are committed to the somatic path and who gather, practice together, and interact in a myriad of ways. When you commit yourself to the energy of this lineage, you set in motion an unceasing unfolding of your own life—your own process of becoming fully human. You are entering into the great project of becoming a complete, whole human being. You are fulfilling the inborn destiny for which you were born, here on this earth at this time. And that, and nothing else, is the spiritual journey that each of us is called to make. To arrive at the full measure of our human existence, to become fully and completely human, is the most noble and also most challenging thing we could ever do; that journey *is* the spiritual journey, and attaining, to say again, that goal is the highest form of spiritual realization available to human beings.

BACKGROUND

I began studying with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1970. Beginning then, and until his death in 1987 and then afterwards, to the best of my ability I have been

trying to gradually absorb and transmit the lineage that I received from him. Lineage is defined in many ways in Tibetan Buddhism, but in Rinpoche's ultimate presentation, its definition is actually quite simple and straightforward. Once we remove the politics and cultural trappings from it, a lineage is simply a way, based on tradition, of understanding and practicing the spiritual life. In my experience, the lineage that Trungpa Rinpoche taught and embodied was amazingly profound, insightful, and transformative; and it was also quite unique. It is my aspiration that, through Dharma Ocean, the essentials of that lineage will be passed on to others.

The spiritual journey outlined by Trungpa Rinpoche included the same six stages of development described above, although he talked about them mostly in different terms. For him, the first stage—our Ground Yana—in fact precedes the official entry onto the Buddhist path; in Rinpoche's presentation, it involved discovering and connecting with our basic human situation and becoming healthy, grounded, and decent people. He called this stage *introducing the world to the basic Shambhala principles*, and he believed that it can be presented to anyone, regardless of whether or not they ever become a Buddhist. The next four stages are traditionally divided among the so-called three yanas: the Hinayana, focusing on the development of a sustained meditation practice (our 2nd and 3rd Yanas); the Mahayana, focusing on awakening the compassion of the heart (our 4th Yana); and the Vajrayana, through uniquely powerful practices and methods, focusing on fully transforming the two veils of emotional upheavals and deeper unconscious obscurations that get between us and our true self (our 5th Yana). The sixth stage taught by Rinpoche, roughly corresponding to the fruition stage of Dzogchen, revisited the Shambhala teachings, but at a deep post-Vajrayana and post-Buddhist level (our 6th Yana). In this stage, the basic Shambhala principles—the fundamental openness of reality, the perfection of the unfolding of the universe, and the utter sacredness of our incarnation—become matters of direct and personal experience and an actual way of being in the world, rather than being mainly an intellectual understanding.

Although our six yanas correspond to the main areas of Rinpoche's teaching, the way we practice them in Dharma Ocean represents a further evolution in one important respect. We understand and practice them in a less theoretical and hence

much more grounded and embodied way than was often the case in Rinpoche's day. Hence, there is much more emphasis on the actual direct, non-conceptual experience of each yana, and on the concrete and practical transformation that that pure experience actually brings about.

In what follows below, the practices of each yana and unfolding journey are described in terms of view. In the accompanying document, the Dharma Ocean Practice Path, you will find up-to-date information on the practices, study, commitments and community aspects of each yana. Neither document is intended to be a complete guide, but to provide an overview of the Dharma Ocean path. Fully engaging with this path necessitates engagement with the Dharma Ocean community, but much of it, such as working with a meditation instructor, can be done from anywhere in the world. As mentioned above, there are many ways to become involved with this lineage. It is important to realize that the training mandalas represent, more than anything, a great invitation to explore your life in whatever way you are called to; they are not boxes to be checked off, but territories we might explore together in this training.

In the following description, I describe the yantras in a progressive manner, each providing the foundation for and naturally leading to the next yana. At the same time, each yana—each training mandala—can be practiced on its own. Beginning with the Ground Yana, each of the yantras contains the lineage in a full and complete way. Theoretically, you could attain complete realization practicing the Ground Yana alone and the same is true of the other yantras. However, for most practitioners, training in the yantras in sequence seems to yield the most satisfying and comprehensive results. Even if you are not currently aspiring to be a Dharma Ocean teacher, consider following the unfolding journey described below, as it provides a very detailed and thorough training in the process of spiritual embodiment.

The following description should not be thought of as being set in stone. Our experience and understanding of the path is continually evolving, and so is the way it is laid out and practiced at any given time. And of course, just as your own individual journey is quite unique, so, too, will be how the path unfolds for you.

THE FIRST YANA: THE GROUND YANA

VIEW

The spiritual journey involves fully exploring who we are and what the experience of our own life is. It involves awakening to what is real in our situation and our world: what is actually the case beyond what we may think or assume or imagine. The life that we actually have, what is given to us as our incarnation, is the ground of the journey. It is what the practice works on, and it is ultimately where the gate to true reality lies.

But what if we have little or no direct connection with our actual experience? What if our life consists entirely of what we know through the mediation of the conceptual frameworks of our thinking mind? In the globalized, commodified, electronic modern culture that we live in today, many of us spend nearly all of our waking hours preoccupied with the purely conceptual, virtual reality of our “devices”. While we may have lots of ideas and preconceptions about who we are and what is real, we often have little if any direct, non-conceptual contact with ourselves or with life. More and more, one meets people who unquestioningly believe that what they *think* about themselves, others, and the world is what is real. No wonder, then, that so many of us are lost in fantasy and wishful thinking and do not know very much at all about who we or others actually are. This disconnection is, of course, pernicious, and it lies behind much of the personal, interpersonal, and societal dysfunction and illness that plagues our world.

When we try to practice meditation in such a state, it generally ends up being further reinforcement of our disconnection, and this was the problem with many of us in Trungpa Rinpoche’s day. Without the ground of reality under our feet—the foundation of direct experience—meditation is limited to recycling what we already think and assume. There can be no true path without the experiential, somatic ground. If we enter the spiritual path and are not deeply connected with what it means to be human in healthy, wholesome, and complete ways, then the spiritual

journey becomes a means of escape, utterly lacking the genuine exploration and discovery that is at the heart of real spirituality. Trungpa Rinpoche calls this disembodied approach *spiritual materialism*, a facsimile spirituality that serves only to reinforce our purely conceptual, abstract, disembodied ego. John Welwood refers to this as *spiritual bypassing*: using the concepts of spirituality as a hiding place where we can avoid the often painful, anxiety-producing developmental tasks of actually growing up.

Within the tantric perspective of Dharma Ocean, there's a very good reason why building a relationship with the concrete experience of ourselves and our world is the foundation of the whole journey: it's because, ultimately, the raw and rugged reality of a fully present and embodied life is where the universe delivers its highest teachings. When we separate from life, we separate from ultimate reality and the opportunities for transformation and meeting sacred reality that our lives offer. This is why, right at the beginning of the spiritual journey, we need to connect with our body, our current situation, and our direct experience of being human. The purpose of the Ground Yana is to connect us in this way and establish this direct, experiential ground under our feet.

In the Ground Yana, we address our disembodiment directly through the somatic meditative protocols that are the foundation of the Dharma Ocean practice journey. These consist of roughly twenty-five distinct practices that are explored in a progressive manner. The practices begin by enabling us to contact our body or Soma in a new way, beyond and outside of the conceptualized body or body image that we all habitually interpose between our conscious, ego selves and the direct, unmediated, non-conceptual experience of our body. We gradually discover how our uncontrolled anxiety, ego reactivity, and endless discursive proliferation obscure the natural health and wisdom of our Soma and end up creating physical and psychological distress and illness of all kinds. The practices lead from this point through a process of deepening somatic awareness wherein we gradually discover the virtually unlimited internal vistas and expanses that wait for us within this incarnation of ours. The journey within the body goes on forever and, in the Ground Yana, we begin to get a sense of the inner geography.

When we experience something from within our body or Soma, without jumping immediately to conclusions, to categorizing, evaluating, and judging, we begin to discover the realm of pure experience: an approaching storm that is portentous, filled with its own impending power that we can feel in our body, that saturates our senses with its own being, its own meaning, its *Isness*. And we are brought into a state of utter stillness and awe before it. We smell it, we taste it, and we receive it into our being. Nothing need, should, or can be done in addition, so overwhelming and so tactile—and so complete—is its stark reality. And so it can be with everything we encounter in our life.

We realize that there's a certain fundamental rugged reality to things that we have never experienced in quite this way, that we never even realized was there. We gradually discover in ourselves a larger and freer range of emotional and perceptual experience than we have previously known. We begin to sense the limitless terrain of our physical being—the endless, open spaces we can enter through the body and the seemingly infinite scope of experience that arises therein. Now we have a context within which we can actually experience the energy of our body, and the tremendous inspiration that arises for life, without the restrictive and suffocating mediation of our ego.

One could practice the somatic disciplines of the Ground Yana for one's whole life without proceeding to any of the other yanas and experience much health, well-being, and happiness, within the inherent limitations of our human existence. And even, as mentioned, liberation itself. If we take this route, the Ground Yana will continue to bring us back to ourselves, help us heal, open us to our life, and reveal to us the wonders and endless possibilities of this incarnation of ours. Within that context, the spiritual journey/life journey that is inherent within us will continue to unfold in a natural and unimpeded way. That is why the Ground Yana is appropriate for anyone and everyone, regardless of situation or circumstance.

THE ROLE OF THERAPEUTIC AND HEALING MODALITIES ON THE JOURNEY

The Ground Yana calls us into a state of physical and psychological health, well-being, and functionality as the foundation of our spiritual journey. Throughout the

journey to full embodiment, our ongoing attention to this foundation can be greatly enhanced and facilitated by the wide array of healing, therapeutic, and well-being modalities now available. Most practitioners typically avail themselves, from time to time, of holistic, somatic, energetic, and psychological modalities of healing and supporting disciplines, such as yoga, T'ai Chi, and Qi Gung. Somatically-based psychological therapies, such as Integrative Manual Therapy, IFS (Internal Family Systems), Jungian, Hakomi, Feldenkreis, Eutonie, and Coherence Therapy modalities, to mention just a few, become very helpful, particularly at the Vajrayana level, where we are seeking to heal deep, unconscious emotional biases and distortions laid down perhaps before we learned to speak.

THE SECOND YANA: THE MEDITATION YANA

VIEW

One of the outcomes of the Ground Yana is the realization of how quickly and often we exit from direct, non-conceptual experience into our thinking mind. While the Ground Yana opens the experience of our true body or Soma, helps us see the exiting process, and shows us how to come back when we depart, it also makes us aware of just how disembodied and “in our head” we are most of the time. Even as practitioners of the Ground Yana, while we are more or less in our bodies—or at least trying to be there—during our actual practice, the impulsive reactivity and habitual patterns of our ego mind still hold sway in daily life, and can seem quite intractable. The yana that addresses this uncontrollable exiting, the next task in our journey, is the Meditation Yana.

For this reason, one of the keynotes of the Meditation Yana is *discipline*. It works on the blind impulsiveness and emotional reactivity that for most of us governs our moment-to-moment, day-to-day life. It is this that creates whirlwinds of distress, dissatisfaction, and confusion all around us, and makes us feel constantly vulnerable, off balance, and dissatisfied. Of course, we may think these whirlwinds are coming from the outside and just happen to us; we may think there is this or that big problem out there, and if we could only resolve or manage it, we’d feel better. What we don’t see, however, is that the whirlwinds, and the anxious and distressed states of mind they tend to lead to, are entirely of our own making. The Meditation Yana brings us to the point where we can begin to see this and address it.

Thus, the second yana *directly* addresses our largely unconscious, habitual and reactive exiting—from the world of direct, non-conceptual experience, into the disembodied ego realm of mental abstraction. While the fundamental issue addressed in the Ground Yana is our *disembodiment*, in the Hinayana, the fundamental dynamic to be addressed is running away. If the Ground Yana addresses the givenness or ground of our situation, and our direct experience and

disconnection from it, the second yana addresses the dynamic mechanism of our dissociation—exactly how and why it occurs.

This is accomplished through the core second-yana discipline, the Somatic Practice of Pure Awareness. The main aspects of Pure Awareness Practice involve the physical posture and the breath, and how we work with them in the practice. The practice is, eventually, to identify fully and completely with the posture, so that there is no separation between awareness and posture—they are not two. In the beginning, though, Pure Awareness Practice is essentially a mindfulness or *shamatha* technique to gather and stabilize our mind, used as the first stage of meditation in virtually all schools of Buddhist meditation. However, instead of the common Buddhist *shamatha* practice of paying attention to the breath at the tip of the nostrils and coming back to that when our mind wanders, here we are paying attention to the points of posture—to the body as a whole—and bringing ourselves back to that.

Strictly speaking, this *shamatha* or mindfulness practice is not the pure awareness practice in its full form, but more the preparation and pathway of entry into it. At the same time, as our practice matures, the basic instruction to identify with the posture and the feeling of the breath does not change; we never back away from that and, in fact, enter into it more deeply as we go. What does change, however, is our experience of the posture and breath and what we find in it. The initial meditation instruction I received in 1970 and the one I pass on to you is this: “If you can practice at least an hour a day, your meditation will evolve beautifully.” Each practitioner needs to see what their life will permit, but from this point onward the commitment to daily meditation practice is the foundation of the entire journey, and should be a life-long intention and discipline. If you are following this path, the expectation is that you will figure out a way to make this happen, at least most of the time.

With Pure Awareness practice, we are taking the next step in terms of the body. It incorporates and integrates all of the essential bodywork practices from the Ground Yana, and gives us a new container for staying with whatever arises in our practice. To use the analogy of learning to play the piano, in the Ground Yana, we

were learning the different scales, so to speak, the different elements of being in our soma. With Pure Awareness, we are putting all these different aspects together into a single piece of music, a single posture—a *super* meditating with the body technique—and we are learning to stay with this somatic embodiment, without departing. These are new elements that allow our experience of the body to continue to develop, becoming more complete and continuous.

THE THIRD YANA: SOMATIC DESCENT

VIEW

The purpose of the third yana, Somatic Descent, is to bring together, integrate, and stabilize what we have learned in the first two yanas, and to take a very big step forward. In Somatic Descent, a different relationship with our body is going to become possible. We are now in a position to hear what the body, as a whole, is continually sending our way in the form of information and communication, in a much more clear, understandable, and applicable way than we could before.

It is true that throughout the first two yanas, we have been tuning in to our body and taking in a tremendous amount of direct, non-conceptual information. But now, from the point of view of Somatic Descent, we see that the Soma has more to offer. We see that it has a great deal of information and communication to offer to us, and to our lives in their entirety. In Somatic Descent, we meet the Soma as a coherent intelligence with a point of view, a process with direction, a source of wisdom, and a limitless benevolence; we see now that it holds and protects our entire person and constantly communicates information about life, from our innermost experience to how to handle specific situations in our lives. And, somehow, it is all so easy and natural. The Soma almost begins to feel like an entity, yet it still isn't an objectifiable or solid thing; rather, it is a supremely intelligent movement, a process of unfolding, and a revelation of the Life Force.

In order to understand and practice Somatic Descent, though, we first need to know the ways in which the Soma goes about knowing things, and also the modalities in which it offers its information to us—to our conscious, ego awareness. This represents our study of the “view” of Somatic Descent, and this study forms an important part of the third yana.

As you'll see, the key point in the practice is being in the mid-body and touching into the empty but vivid energy that we find there. Psychologically, we have descended right to the boundary between consciousness and our unconscious—that

is the zone of the mid-body, and we receive the experience that is being born there. In the Buddhist tradition, the terms for this vibrant, bursting space are pure experience, non-conceptual experience, experience without an experiencer, and *jnana*—wisdom felt from the inside, as opposed to *prajna*, which is seeing from the outside. In the Focusing tradition of Eugene Gendlin, it is called “felt sense,” which gives a good experiential feel for this mid-body experience. As you will see, the non-conceptual or ineffable experience of the mid-body, the felt sense of it, is not physical, it's not emotional, and it's not feeling in the ordinary sense: it's the bodily sense of meaning. In the stillness of the mid-body, experience arises as full of import, significance, and meaning, all the more so because it is happening outside of the realm of conceptual labeling and judgment. Strangely enough, when we're right on the edge of the unconscious and we feel the felt sense of the totality of our body, it is a bodily sense of meaning. There's meaning in it, but not meaning in a verbal way; it's meaning in very specific significance and weightiness.

As we begin to accrue some experiences of the felt sense, non-conceptual experience, we see the possibility of receiving the Soma on its own terms, without the mediation of our thinking mind. It is not simply that we are the recipients of the “new information” the Soma is delivering; beyond this, we find ourselves in the presence of the Soma's own ways of being, knowing, and, in particular, communicating itself to us, on the most fundamental level.

Somatic Descent allows us, in a more intentional and deliberate way than the Ground Yana, to bring our conscious awareness right to the boundary of the depths of the body—and to hold it there. As we shall see, in that very particular boundary, which we call “the somatic zone,” we are not exactly residing in our habitual conscious world, nor have we completely lost ourselves in the unconscious. In this unique liminal awareness, a kind of no man's land or limbo, we are able to be present to the unique expressiveness of the Soma in its most pure and primary form.

In Buddhism, it is said that this kind of seeing undercuts and neutralizes the partiality and bias of the discursive, ego consciousness—as Chögyam Trungpa put it, it “burns up the fuel of the conceptual mind.” When we perceive things from the standpoint of the Soma, even if only for a moment, suddenly there is no self-

referential, self-enclosed ego at all. In that instant, there is only what is. In this way, the perception of so-called ordinary reality by the Soma is what Buddhists call liberation or nirvana. Now we can see that this fruition is far from the separation from mundane life that we perhaps assumed it to be; instead, it is a coming closer and closer, to the point where the experience becomes so intense and all-encompassing that there is no longer any separation. We begin to live in terms of the wisdom of the Soma; there is no longer any separate self, standing outside of the experience. In Somatic Descent, we discover the Soma is the most important resource in our life.

THE FOURTH YANA: MAHAYANA

VIEW

In Buddhism, the Yana of Love and Compassion is known as the Mahayana. As we practice and continue to open up, slow down, and become more grounded, we begin to realize that we are deeply, deeply connected with everything. We see that we are already in relationship with other people, animals, nature, and the whole world, and the rest of the journey will be discovering and deepening that sense of connection and learning how best to respond to it. You and a quasar billions of light years away—you're on the same journey. We're all in it together. You and a black hole, you and an exploding star, not to mention you and everything in this world or you and an atom or a subatomic particle—we're all in it together and we're making the same incredible voyage. And all of it is alive and rampant with Life.

The Mahayana begins to open up this vast sense of how connected we are with all these living others; it opens up the tenderness of the heart, and the sense of sympathy for everyone and everything that suffers, which is everything that is. It's very beautiful, and we have a whole set of practices around this process.

When we enter the Mahayana, we are committing ourselves to see, experience, and feel things from the viewpoint of an open heart. This is what the Bodhisattva vow means. It sounds very simple, but it requires a lot of work. It's not some kind of romantic idea of compassion or loving people. When you do the difficult and often painful work of truly opening your heart, you enter a space of tenderness and vulnerability. Then you see others as they are, and seeing them, you cannot help but *love*. You feel a sense of warmth, kindness, understanding, and empathy toward them—and in fact, as the Mahayana path unfolds, you might almost feel a sense of identity, in the sense that you know exactly what's going on with them, because you sense and feel it quite directly.

Over time, we develop our capacity not simply to feel with our heart but to come into proximity with what we call *the knowledge of the heart*, which is completely embodied. It's physical, it's emotional, and in a very deep way, it's cognitive. The

heart knows what the thinking mind can't know. This is a capacity that has largely atrophied in most modern people. We need to learn how to see and sense and feel and know through the heart, and this begins in earnest with the bodhicitta practices. It's a gradual waking-up of the capacities of the heart. What makes the heart's way of knowing not just superior, but ultimate is this: in the heart there is no disconnection and no abstraction. the heart knows the "other," each specific, particular "other," in its fully embodied completeness, its utterly intense livingness, and its unfathomable journey.

We need to overcome the ideas of sentimentality and romanticism that people in Western culture often associate with the heart, as if the heart is a sort of purely feeling organ. In fact, that's not accurate. The heart *is* the knowledge. The heart knows in a way that's entirely objective and operates independent of the ego. The heart is the highly sensitive and attuned dimension of our overall body as the Buddha nature. When we talk about experiencing the world within the big space, we're talking about the heart. It's the heart that is the organ of knowledge—of seeing and comprehending—of the big space.

Along these lines, the Mahayana takes the somatic work to a new level of subtlety. Whereas the first three yantras work primarily with the Nirmanakaya aspects of our incarnation, the Mahayana and the Bodhicitta practices uncover new levels of subtlety of our body; they open up the level of the Samboghakaya, or the energetic and feeling level, that is centered in our heart and extends out through the whole body.

In the Mahayana, even though there is a whole body of compassion practices that we do, it's really about developing Pure Awareness further, in terms of increasing the sensitivity of our feeling, sensing, and intuiting capacities of the heart in relation to our connectedness to the entire universe. We are deepening what our body knows, and we need to remove the veils from that sensitivity to open it up. When we do that, we start to see people *completely* as individuals, and we begin to see that we have a natural love for them. We don't have to force it or manufacture it—we have a self-existing, relentless love for other people, and a desire to connect with them.

The experience of practice in the Mahayana typically unfolds in several stages. First, we might feel quite numb. *I can't feel anything. I can't feel my heart.* At a certain point, through breathing into the heart, you might begin to feel something. You may feel like your heart is in a vice, it's constricted, it's dead. That's fine. You keep breathing. You want to run, you want to scream, you want to tear your skin off. You want to do something to open up your shut-down, armored heart. Although it is very painful, there is so much good inspiration in that; it is your heart beginning to wake up, to know what it is feeling.

The next step is that you may begin to feel actual physical pain in your heart—it's sore, aching. You might practice with this discomfort for quite some time. But then, eventually, emotional pain will likely begin to come up. This first level of emotional pain is related to our habitual neurotic upheavals, our basic emotional freak-outs that get between us and relating openly to others and the world around us. We call that level of pain "the first veil."

As we work with the material of the first veil, we learn a deeper level of heart awareness. Through the practices, we begin to sense the open, empty space that lies right at the center of the heart. At this stage, we will spend some time exploring this unconditioned space of the heart and opening it further. In the bodhicitta training, we now see that this space, which we discovered as the underlying reality of our body in our Pure Awareness practice, is also the underlying reality of our heart.

By developing the feeling of the unconditioned openness of our heart, we are providing psychological room for ourselves to experience our pain and the pain of others in an unconditioned way, without feeling that we are polluting ourselves or taking any of it into ourselves in a solid way. The heart can never be tainted, injured, or compromised; because it is grounded in the unfathomable expanse of our basic nature, there is never any place for anything to land or stick. We learn here not only that we can afford to love in a completely open way, but that that is the only way to truly love.

After a certain amount of time and practice, a much deeper level of emotional pain may start to surface. Uncomfortable as this may be, it is an extraordinarily important step in opening the heart. We begin to run into the deep unconscious

predispositions, blockages, and emotional distortions that make up “the second veil.” In our culture, we call them deep traumas. They’re not conscious, and therefore you can’t get at them directly; but through breathing into and opening the heart, they come to the surface, and you begin to see that you have these fundamental—but quite twisted and distorted—attitudes and beliefs about life. The more you see, the more you begin to wonder about them and distrust the stamp of reality they seem to have. For instance, you may always feel that you’re a victim, that that’s your role in life, and it runs through everything that you do. You find that you are attracting people who want to victimize others. You think the world is simply like that—a place that victimizes—and you are just one of the victims. But it is not how things actually are; it is the appearance of your second veil.

When second veil issues start coming up, they’re amazingly painful and very disturbing, because they’ve been so deeply buried in our unconscious. This is where the Pure Awareness is absolutely essential. Now, when you begin to run into very difficult experiences, you know what to do: you come back to the Pure Awareness posture, and you try to be here, try to be here, try to be here. The Pure Awareness enables us to work with every triggered and spun-out state of mind that we could ever come up with, because it brings us back into the openness and infinite peace of our body, our soma, our basic being, our heart—and we disentangle from the traumatized state.

But there is more. By breathing into the heart when we are triggered and our second-veil-based, compromised person comes up, we keep breathing. Eventually, we arrive at a place where we simultaneously see on the other side of the second veil. In other words, we see that this tormented version of the world is not the real world; we are simultaneously in touch with the second veil and seeing the real world—beautiful, pure, and beyond distortion—on the other side. This experience of feeling our distorted, tormented self and, at exactly the same time, seeing what actually is on the other side of our twisted, traumatized version, dissolves the trauma over time. The second veil, the trauma, can only survive in ignorance and unconsciousness of what is real and true. In this way, we can resolve core traumas at their very root. (For some recent fascinating experimental verification of this

approach, look into Coherence Therapy and its research arm, Memory Reconsolidation).

Through the bodhicitta work, then, we begin to find that we are able to work with ourselves, and with others, in a very direct and precise way and, through that, transform our deepest obstacles. We are able to genuinely open, handle the inevitable triggering that happens when we do, and come through it to a place where we have the capacity to care about others in a more and more true and authentic way.

THE FIFTH YANA: THE VAJRAYANA

VIEW

As we continue to practice, we begin to feel a kind of hunger to let go more, to receive the universe further into our state of being; a hunger to extend ourselves to the ends of space and time; a hunger to embrace the totality of what is, and to feel and know it. And not just from our own personal standpoint—we begin to realize, as a result of the Bodhicitta practice, that it is possible for us to know, inhabit, and experience life from standpoints that are far beyond the normal, centralized human conception and experience of things. We long for that kind of knowledge. We also begin to realize that the universe itself is on some kind of journey, and we want to know more about that. When this begins to stir in us, that is the point at which we might consider entering the Vajrayana.

In our lineage, what we are working toward is the complete openness of being, where we see, experience, engage, appreciate, and love life as it is. What we primarily need to do in the Vajrayana is directly address the two veils, and particularly the “second veil,” all the unconscious, distorted emotional assumptions and beliefs about how the world is, who we are, and what other people are like. The issues of our traumas began to come into focus in the Mahayana and there we began to work with them. But in the Vajrayana, our aim is, over time, to dismantle these more or less completely.

Everyone in Dharma Ocean will enter the Vajrayana by attending Vajra Assembly and receiving pointing-out instructions (also known as “transmission”). In terms of practice after Vajra Assembly, students can return to any of the previous four yantras, practicing them from the viewpoint of the awakened state. When one feels ready, a student can begin to engage the more intense form practices of the Vajrayana, completing the classical ngöndro or preliminary practices, with 100,000 each of prostrations, Vajrasattva mantra, mandala offering, and guru yoga. Following this, one would typically receive the empowerment or abhisheka into Vajrayogini’s

mandala. This confers permission to practice the Vajrayogini sadhana and provides extensive oral instructions. After completing one million mantras, one is then able to attend the Vajrayogini Fire Offering, one of the most impactful and transformative of all the Vajrayana form practices. Subsequently, one can receive instruction in the Six Yogas of Naropa.

While doing these form practices of ngondro and sadhana, there will come a time when a longing for formless practice arises. “Formless” means that rather than working primarily with liturgies, visualizations, mantras, and mudras, as in the form path, here your practice is relating directly with the empty, open awareness of your basic mind. Though this path is “formless,” like the form path, there is a progressive journey, available in the *Training in Mahamudra* text and instructions. Here, one begins with practices designed to help us explore what is called the “unmoving mind,” the emptiness of the Dharmakaya mind of the awakened state. Next, one focuses on the “moving mind,” “the expression of awareness,” the mind of thoughts, memories, images, moods, feelings, emotions—all of the mental phenomena that arise out of the emptiness of our fundamental awareness. Then, one takes up the sense perceptions, “the radiance of awareness,” examining the nature of perceptions when they are taken exactly as they are, without mental overlay. Finally, one concentrates on developing a mind that can be with whatever arises, taking the appearance itself as the guideline, both in formal practice and everyday life. When one is ready, a return to the form practices comes naturally.

In fact, the form Vajrayana includes a lot of formless practice within it, and by the same token, formless Vajrayana includes quite a bit of form. So whichever approach you are practicing, you are also training in the other. Either way, a great deal of our work is to continue to further dismantle the traumatic obstructions between ourselves and our own deepest experience. That’s what the Vajrayana is all about. It’s a lot of work. We may spend years and years doing it, but if you dismantle the core traumas, then the superficial meltdowns, neurotic upheavals, and emotional acting-out just don’t have any ground anymore. They pop up, but more and more, they will just fizzle out before they get going. Over time, the second veil material becomes more transparent; it becomes very workable for you. You can

recognize it, and you know how to come back to your body, to breathe into your heart, and it immediately loses its footing.

At the Vajrayana stage, the discipline has to be doing the practice for its own sake. You can't get hung up on what the practice produces, because it's going to produce all kinds of fantastic things and all kinds of horrible things as well, in terms of experience, and if your motivation is based on what you are getting out of it for yourself, you won't practice.

The Mahayana view doesn't really change very much in the Vajrayana, but the practices are much more precise and transformative. We start to approach the realization of ourselves as part of nature's spontaneous expression. And that's the goal of the path—we're getting close.

THE SIXTH YANA: THE YANA OF LIFE ITSELF

VIEW

At a certain point, through the work of the previous five yanas, we have worn away enough of the second veil that something else is required, and this is sixth yana, the Yana of Life Itself. While in its full practice this is a very advanced stage, still, almost from the beginning, we have glimpses of it. These glimpses are important because they show us where this whole journey is ultimately heading—into a space of complete openness, nakedness, and somatic directness with our human experience. Having this perspective is also important because it undermines any tendency we may have toward spiritual materialism, any tendency to turn our practice at any level into personal territory and ego attainment. For these reasons, it is important that we all have some understanding of this final stage even quite early on.

As a Vajrayana student, you could hang on to your practice, your view, and the spiritual state of being you have created. But you may wonder if there is something beyond that? The Yana of Life Itself is where you begin to let go of your formal practice. You can do it because you have the requisite emptiness, maturity and attainment. You are at that point that you can do it. If you do it too early, it doesn't work, but when the time comes, you let go of your position. In the Vajrayana tradition, they say that you "enter the action." This means that as a teacher, you give up your teaching identity and your position in the world. In traditional Tibet and larger Asia, often people who enter the action disappear into the jungle and are never seen again. In the Chinese tradition, it's called "the return." People just disappear and you can't find them anywhere, because they let go of all that they became in their spiritual journey and become one with life. And that was the teaching for their students: "If you think I was ever anything separate from life itself, you didn't quite get it." (Read Tilopa's final instructions to Naropa, or Marpa's final visit to India, looking for Naropa.)

So, the sixth yana is the process of letting go of everything, including our identity as a spiritual practitioner, and the reason we let go is because there is something to discover, something calling us further. These are called the eight illuminations. Let me give a couple of examples.

In the first illumination, space becomes not only the main thing but the *only* thing. Here, you surrender into the space of your own nature and realize that your fundamental state of being is infinite space. Your being is not separate from the rest of the world, so at this point, you are not a person who is practicing space or looking at space—you see that you *are* space.

Then, in the second illumination, within the space, you begin to experience everything that happens in life as abiding in its own natural perfection. Everything—from the smallest sub-atomic particle up to the galaxies and all the worlds that may exist, including all that we would formerly have called “ourselves”—is part of a vast, glorious, interconnected dance. We marvel at how, in pleasure and pain, in confusion and enlightenment, in life and in death, the universe is expressing itself in this moment in the most apt and timely way. Here, as throughout the sixth yana, there is no room for any centralizing tendency. Any sense of self-reference is ruled out. There is an opening to the logic, the patterns, the beauty, and the ultimate meaningfulness of the dance of the universe,

In the third illumination, what is called the fourth moment—beyond past, present, and future—arrives at its fruition. Here, we realize that this moment beyond time is the only place that the universe reveals itself, where experience arrives completely, beyond reference points, as absolutely fresh, spontaneous, and unique. Here, we see that this is the true and only reality; that here the universe is in ultimate revelation and that everything outside is just a figment of our imagination. In the third illumination, we do touch eternity. The other five illuminations unfold from here.

As mentioned, we have glimpses of the sixth yana at even the earliest stages of the path—at a dathün, for instance. But what happens in the sixth yana is that this becomes your default experience of reality. You live within the great perfection of the universe, and every emotion you feel, every person you meet, and every

situation you see is an expression of the universe's sacredness itself. So, at that point, there's no room for an ego at all. There's no room for a separate position.

They're called illuminations because you're not doing anything—in fact, you're undoing everything that you've built up as a spiritual practitioner. The more you undo all those things, the more you come into the illumination of your own state of being, or rather “THE” state of being of which you are an expression and a part. These illuminations were actually there from the beginning, but our whole state of being was so covered over and obscured by our thinking, trauma, and human hopes and fears that we didn't have access to it. But in the sixth yana, we do. Now, finally, we understand what Life is, completely in and of itself, and, within that context, what our life is: why we were born, what it ultimately means, and how we have never been anything other than a seamless and perfect part of the whole.