Vajrakilaya, Guru Rinpoche Prophesies, and the Mandala Principle

Transcript from an interview with Olivia Clementine

Love & Liberation Podcast

Khandro Kunzang Dechen Chodron

About the Guest

Khandro Kunzang is a long time Buddhist practitioner and teacher, as well as holder of the Rigzin Sogdrub and Dudjom Tersar lineages. She is the Executive Director for P'hurba Thinley Ling retreat center and oversees the translations and publications of practice texts available on Saraswati Publications. Khandro Kunzang leads retreats and teachings worldwide, and heads the P'hurba Peace Mandala Project International.

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WHAT IS THE MANDALA PRINCIPLE?

OLIVIA

I'm Olivia Clementine, and this is Love and Liberation. Today our guest is Khandro Kunzang Dechen Chodron. Thank you so much for meeting today. I know we had bookmarked the mandala principle, so we'll be exploring that today. Maybe we begin then with the basics. So what is the mandala principle?

KHANDRO KUNZANG

That's a great question. What is the mandala principle? You know, I like that because most people know mandala images. When you say 'mandala,' something will come in mind, an image that has some kind of spherical shape, with points in the center and geometric designs inside, a symmetrical design. So people kind of know that word 'mandala' now. I think it might even be in the English dictionary at this point, right? So they think of this image as a thing, but it really is a principle. It really is a very profound principle that communicates deep spiritual ideas. Of course, mandala as a

principle and a design have existed in a lot of cultures. But in particular, in the Vajrayana Buddhist culture, they play a prominent role in our spiritual practices. Many people have witnessed or seen the sand mandalas that the Tibetan lamas will create as part of their generating an enlightened being, palace, and retinue. There's a whole tradition of making sand mandalas that are created and then dissipated, as part of the generation and the dissolution phase. But what's not so commonly known is that there are actually three-dimensional mandalas. When we see this two-dimensional mandala image, this round shape with concentric circles and squares, we're actually looking at an aerial view of a building design. It's like the top down floor plan of a building design of a three-dimensional structure.

They're not so common. You will find three dimensional mandalas in several monasteries in Nepal. They're usually on the top floor of the monastery. You may not know about them. You have to find out and go up and view them. In some places they're restricted. You can't view them unless you've had Vajrayana empowerment because they are part of those sacred practices. So they're not so common.

Mostly in the west, we've seen the pictures, the flat images, paintings, or the sand mandalas. We have not seen the three-dimensional mandalas. And so that's what we are doing — we're creating this three dimensional mandala. The purpose of that is because there's a principle in Buddhism of 'liberation upon seeing,' tong-drol, that to simply see this sacred geometrical pattern makes an imprint on the mind, because it communicates enlightened mind.

Two-dimensional Vajrakilaya Mandala from the Dudjom Tersar

Mandalas are actually like a map of the structure of reality. They are an organizing principle, organizing order out of chaos, taking lots of disparate things and organizing them in such a way through this enlightened order that's implicit in the universe.

KHANDRO KUNZANG

These particular kinds of mandalas that are in the Vajrayana, they are something called the 'palace architecture style' that was formed in the 12th and 13th century. They literally are the palace or the abode of an enlightened deity, the representation of the absolute enlightened nature of mind as an image of a deity. So there'll be some kind of deity in the center, and then they're manifesting their abode and their retinues. So things will unfold from the center in this sort of geometric way, always according to the four directions. You have this importance of these directions, which all have different qualities. There's this unfolding and opening, the retinue, and then

the palace structure. And then you have outside the mandala, concentric rings that have different meanings.

It's really a principle of unfoldment, from a center point. So mandalas all have some kind of periphery ring in a spherical shape, and some kind of center. The center-rim is a really basic idea of a mandala structure, and then what is forming out of that. These ideas of organizing principles, patterns, inside and outside, center and periphery — these are all concepts. And yet there is behind that, this ordering principle that is beyond concept. So ultimately, mandalas communicate this idea of unification. It's the great unification, the great oneness. All these separate things are being unified by some sense of oneness. They are interdependent. They co-emerge and co-arise in dependence on each other. The deity arises in dependence with their palace, with their retinue. So, it's a oneness — ultimately, its communication is this principle of non-duality and oneness.

There's a lot of dimensions being communicated, very particular things, and each part of the mandala has specific meanings; it actually gets very complex. And yet it's communicating wholeness and oneness, this principle behind all of phenomena that is connecting it.

And then on a personal level, it's communicating this idea of 'my own self' in the center of 'my experience.' Because on a personal level, we are also in the mandala of our own world. The mandala is a kind of sphere of influence that we create. We all have this. That word 'mandala' is often used in that way — they'll talk about a Lama and the mandala of students. That word is used to describe a sphere of influence.

So we all have this; we're in the center of this mandala world that I'm creating with my senses and my cognition. So it's communicating how our mind works. It's sort of

a map of our mind, of the mind, both on a conceptual level and also on an absolute level. So that's the purpose of the mandala principle.

And then the mandala structures as they're either painted, or the sand mandalas, or in our case, this three-dimensional mandala — there's very specific aspects to those shapes and forms. And the various things that are in the mandala communicate a lot of symbolic meanings. So I think that's the big picture.

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THE MANDALA AS SUPPORT FOR PRACTICE

OLIVIA

You spoke about the mandala as a support for practice as well, you mentioned that.

KHANDRO KUNZANG

The mandala as a support for practice has to do with these Vajrayana systems, sadhanas, that are centered around a deity. So in all of the tantric texts in the different lineages, they're based around some specific deity. And that will be particular to the lineage, whether it's a Dakini, a feminine principle, whether it's a Yidam, whether it's a Guru. There'll be some kind of deity representation in the very center. Sometimes they're single. Sometimes they're in union with a consort. Then they manifest this field of their influence. The shapes of the mandalas — whether the inside is going to be a circle, a square, a triangle — has to do with what kind of deity it is.

All the other aspects of the mandala has to do with our sadhana practices. When we're involved in the more elaborate forms of generating the deity, they will have very elaborate descriptions of their abode, so oftentimes we have to visualize this first: 'from a seed syllable, this arises and this arises, etc.' and we construct the environment. And then finally the deity is arising in the center of it. These are the elaborate forms of sadhana practice. A lot of times what we are exposed to in the

west are the very short forms of sadhana practice that's only focused on the central deity. So they'll just be the deity visualization, but not all this other elaboration. But if you're participating in drupchens, for example, the full retreat sadhana, you're going to encounter these elaborate descriptions of the mandala, and that's when they will construct these mandalas, when they're doing these types of great accomplishment rituals. It'll either be a sand mandala or they'll have an already constructed mandala that is the center of the practice. That is used as the support for the visualization. Ultimately when you become more deeply immersed in the traditions of whatever lineage you're doing and whatever deity you're practicing, you're going to encounter the long form of that particular sadhana cycle. And there will be the description of their palace and the mandala that you are then to visualize. So at that time you learn about all the different components of the mandala and what they mean, and then you're meditating on that. You're meditating on these meanings as you're generating it in your mind. And then the deity is in the very center of this.

Three-dimensional Vajrakilaya Mandala

So it's kind of like a journey; we begin at the periphery, the outermost ring, which is this ring of fire. That's the wisdom that is going to burn all the ignorance. Then we enter in and we go in these concentric levels. Once we pass the ring of fire, then there's the ring of the vajras that represents the indestructible mind. And then we pass through the ring of the lotuses, which is sort of like our rebirth and renewal. And then if it's a wrathful deity, we encounter this ring of charnel grounds. This is a very interesting aspect of wrathful mandalas, these eight charnel grounds that represent the eight aspects of consciousness: the five senses and the three levels of conceptual mind. And these charnel grounds represent the boneyard of our existence, of our current samsaric existence, and the ignorance and poisons that cause us to be in samsara.

So the charnel grounds are on the very outer ring, which is the remains of our existence from our many lives. And each of these charnel grounds have different figures in them. They have stupas and sadhus meditating. Then they also have lots of skeletons and body parts, wild animals, trees, and nagas. They have this whole world, like a diorama; each one of these has all these figures in them, and they represent each of the eight consciousnesses. So then that is the world we are in.

And from there we enter into the sacred ground of the deity. There we start entering into the palace, beginning with the four gates that are in these four directions. That represent the elements. There are different colors and we have to enter into one of the gates. And there'll be the protectors, all the protectors will be there. And then the gate guardians, we have to pass through the gate guardian. So it's like this kind of purification by fire until we can enter into the inner sanctum of the deity, whatever deity that is.

And in the case of the mandala we're building, we're building this Vajrakilaya mandala. So that's very particular to this Yidam that's in our tradition. The Dudjom lineage's main Yidam is Vajrakilaya, a very wrathful deity. Vajrakilaya has a retinue. So a Vajrakilaya mandala has the central deity which are in these p'hurba shapes,

dagger shapes, with the heads and the wings. In the center, are Vajrakilaya with his two consorts. And then emanates out from there. The top level is the main deity, then there's another level where you have the five Buddha families Vajrakilaya. And then there's another level where you have the ten Herukas and their consorts, and each have two progeny. And then another level is the twenty-one Sons. And then another level, etc. You get these levels of manifestation that grow out of this central point, and they all have a function, they all serve a purpose. You have to learn about these as you're learning about this particular sadhana of Vajrakilaya.

You have to learn what each of these deities look like, what is their function, what is their enlightened quality? They're all aspects of enlightened quality. So in the Vajrakilaya Mandala, inside the palace are going to be an array of these different p'hurbas that have different heads, animal heads, and they're all carved out of wood.

That's inside the palace.

Other types of mandalas will have other deities inside, and how they will be arrayed will be particular to that sadhana cycle. So that's going to be different for the different deities. Otherwise they all have this sort of concentric ring of the fire and the vajras and the lotus. and the palace with the four doors. They all sort of share that type of structure. Whether they have charnel grounds or not, whether they're wrathful or not, and inside the inner sanctum, what specifically is there.
So as we're doing these practices, it's like a journey from the outer rim into the center where then ultimately, we become this. We become the deity, and this mandala and palace become our manifestation. That's the skillful means. These are all skillful means of working with our own mind to show us our own true Buddha nature, by using this methodology. So it's like a journey as we use the mandala. The mandala becomes a support, a visual support for this journey, this meditative

journey that we're going, into the innermost, ultimate aspect of our own buddha nature.

So that's how it's used as far as practice. But these mandalas also serve another purpose: as a kind of field of blessing. And this is where we get into the project that we're doing, that Lama Dawa conceived of many years ago. Because they are considered a powerful source of blessings in the same way that stupas are.
Stupas are much more common now, and in the west we see many, many stupas being constructed. They have a geometric form, very specific sacred geometry. They're filled with many amazing things, and they themselves become this field of blessing that profoundly influences people and the surrounding areas in a beneficial way; that profoundly influences the essences of the elements. And so constructing a three-dimensional mandala has a very similar benefit. Wherever these mandalas are constructed, their benefits extend out into all directions of space, all dimensions of time, and bless the fundamental elements.

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THE P'HURBA PEACE MANDALA PROJECT

KHANDRO KUNZANG

What kind of mandala is it? What is the deity? What is the deity's quality? The deities have different qualities. There are some that are peaceful, some are enriching, some are empowering, and some are wrathful, according to the four activities. And in this case, this is Vajrakilaya, a very wrathful deity.
Lama Dawa had many visions, or inspired downloads you could say, from his protectors and from his gurus, who told him to construct Vajrakilaya mandalas in very particular places; three particular places. Why Vajrakilaya? Because Vajrakilaya is the most powerful way to undercut negativity, conflict, and warfare.
This goes into many of the prophetic things that Lama Dawa saw for the future: more and more conflict, more and more global warfare; and of course, this is exactly

what we're seeing. But it's also in accordance with the prophecies of Guru Rinpoche. In particular, there's a text by Dudjom Lingpa called the Kilaya Kajang, which is the "Prophetic Guide to the Seventeen Activities of Vajrakilaya." And in this terma revelation, Guru Rinpoche is having this conversation with Yeshe Tsogal. This is after he has given Vajrakilaya teachings and now he's instructing Yeshe Tsogyal that these teachings need to be hidden as termas. And then she's asking him a series of questions, "when these termas are revealed in the future, what will the world be like? What will the signs be when these teachings need to be manifest in the future?" And so Guru Rinpoche then gives us a long list of future predictions of all the calamities that we're going to be facing, and all the background causes of them. Then he names the different reincarnations of tertons and teachers that are going to manifest at different future times. He says clearly that the most effective practice during this time will be Vajrakilaya. So this text speaks of the importance of Vajrakilaya during the difficult times coming in the future. He goes on to say that there is no method other than Vajrakilaya to avert this kind of negativity and danger. So based on the prophecies of Guru Rinpoche, and in particular in the Dudjom lineage of Dudjom Lingpa, Lama Dawa felt through his own inspired vision that this would be very, very beneficial to build these mandalas.

Of course we do Vajrakilaya practice; doing the practice is part of it. But the other part of these spiritual traditions are these kinds of monumental structures that serve to benefit in particular ways. So therefore stupas are well known. But mandalas also have the same kind of benefit; that to construct a mandala in particular places that can optimize the blessings, will have profound energetic benefits that can help to mitigate and undercut the levels of anger and violence, which is on the rise.

So this is part of his aspiration he had for many years. And of course, because Lama Dawa does mirror divinations, he got many guidance about location, etc. and finally

it was settled. One is this location that I'm involved in, in Northeast Iowa, on the banks of the Mississippi River.

This was seen as a very, very auspicious place because it's on the central channel of the North American continent. The Mississippi River is the central channel. Three quarters of America drains into the Mississippi River, which empties into the Gulf of Mexico. But not only that, when we went up to that area of northeast Iowa to check it out, Lama Dawa had many, many visitations by the local spirits and the nagini of the river, because it was very alive there. Come to find out, there was all these Native American effigies that were there created 2,000 years ago that still existed on the bluffs of the Mississippi River Valley. That area of the Mississippi River is very beautiful. It's actually now a federal fish and wildlife refuge, a 260 miles stretch. And there's one-thousand foot high bluffs on either side of the river valley, which is three miles wide, with rivers and islands and lakes. It's incredible. These Native American mounds are in the shape of animals, in the shape of snakes and birds, and are 2,000 years old. Some of them have been preserved. There's a federal park in Iowa called the Effigy Mounds National Monument that has preserved some of them. Most of

them were destroyed by the European farmers that came in and turned the prairie into farmland. They didn't know what they were. But some of them have been preserved and so, lo and behold, the Native Americans also recognized this area as a powerful place.

They think these effigies were used for ceremonial purposes. There are some that have human remains in them. So some of them were burial mounds, but many of them were not and they think the native Americans went up to these bluffs to do ceremony.

So Lama Dawa had many visitations when we went to the area and we realized we should try to find property here on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, particularly on the Iowa side, because then it's facing east. This eastward facing was very important for Vajrakilaya, which is Vajra family from the eastern direction. That was a very important geocentric aspect that needed to be there. And the other thing that was needed was to be on a major body of water, so that the water carries the

blessings. In this case, down to the Gulf of Mexico, and then can spread out throughout the whole world.

Aerial view of P'hurba Thinley Ling land on the bluffs overlooking the Upper Mississippi River Valley Fish and Wildlife Refuge, and surrounded by the 2,000 acre Lansing Wildlife Management refuge.

So what's the vehicle of transfer of these blessings? In this case the water element, again, the Vajra family. Water element; you know some are fire elements, some are air elements like this. In this case, it had to do with the water element. So all these factors come into play. And so we did, we found this beautiful property that was just put on the market right on a bluff that is shaped like a p'hurba, pointing east. It's very difficult to find these kind of properties there. And so there's the Iowa property. And then, at the same time he had similar experience in central Mexico near this volcanic mountain, Popocatapetl, a very sacred mountain and active volcano, one of the most dangerous volcanoes in the world. There's a caldera underneath it with Mexico city with 20 million people, nearby. There he had many visions of the god of

the mountain, the lha of the mountain. Just like the lha of the Mississippi River, the nagini came to him, in this case, the spirit of the mountain came to him. So he saw that there needs to be also a mandala constructed and installed near the base of this volcanic mountain, and that would have to do with a fire element. So the Mississippi is working with the water element, and the volcano is working with the fire element.

And then the third mandala is to be in P'harping, in Nepal, in Yanglesho, where Guru Rinpoche first practiced Vajrakilaya and started to disseminate this cycle. That will be according to the earth element.

So we've been working on this project for many years and now the mandala for Iowa was finished in 2020. We managed to ship it back to the US as the world was shutting down with this pandemic. That was pretty wild. And earlier this year (2024), the Mexico mandala was finished and is now in storage in Mexico City. The Nepal mandala is currently being worked on, and that's going to be installed at the Dudjom Yangsi monastery in P'harping. We've already pre-arranged that they are

going to build the temple for it and install this in Yanglesho.

So that was his vision, and it had to do with the prophecies of Guru Rinpoche, of Dudjom Lingpa, the importance of Vajrakilaya, and what we can do as practitioners. Of course, we have our practices, but this is also an aspect of the practices; to create these kind of sacred structures that are there long after we're gone, that have their own beneficial effects to pacify, to enrich, to empower, and to subjugate. In this case, it is to subjugate.

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THE MANDALA, THE ELEMENTS, AND THE FOUR DIRECTIONS

OLIVIA

I'm curious how the mandala allows the elements to be pacified, the mandala itself and those four directions; what is that relationship?

KHANDRO KUNZANG

Well, the form of these sacred structures, they themselves have the power to bless, because of their design, because of what they're made out of, and because they become consecrated. For example, when you consecrate a stupa or you consecrate a mandala, the deity becomes installed in there. There's a special ritual that you install — even statues, like all the statues that you see, they're filled with things, mantras — and then there's a consecration ritual where this energy is installed. So they themselves, they work without doing anything. Their very presence, because they have a special form according to the rules of how they're made, their dimensions, the sacred geometry, and the materials that are used are very special materials. They're done exactly according to the text, and then they're consecrated. And so they give off a field of blessings that will permeate all of the elements.

And then if they're placed in a particular spot where there's an element that's very powerful, like in this case, the Mississippi River, water will be the dominant vehicle. Or next to the Popocatepétl, which is a volcano, the fire element. And those are the exterior forms of elements. But elements all also have a subtle level as well.

So the four directions also communicate these elements. The five elements in this system is space, and space is usually in the center. And from the space radiates the other four elements: air, water, fire, and earth. And they have to do with the different directions: east is water, west is fire, north is air, and south is earth.

You have this idea that from the void, or from the absolute nature of space, the first manifestation forms. Form comes from this emptiness. And it starts in this very subtle level of the subtle elements. They have different colors that signify these subtle aspects, and that coalesces, coalesces, solidifies, solidifies, to form the physical elements that make up the world that we know, that we can touch and feel and see, and smell and hear. And our bodies also have these five elements. The solidity of our bones is the earth element. The blood and lymph is the water element. The heat of our body is the fire element. The breath and movement is the air element. And our thinking consciousness is the space element.

So everything is made of the elements. In the texts they'll talk about the 'mother element' and the 'child elements.' So from the mother elements, we are the child elements. There's this process of generation, this creation process that begins from this absolute void. And so the mandala represents this unfolding of this creation process.

It's a symbolic representation of this process of creation, and so it has an impact on the subtle moving into the physical world. In the material world, then the water element there's the river. But there's a subtle element to that river, too. It's not just

the water that we can feel and see. There's a subtle dimension behind that appearance, there's a subtle realm of that water element. But it's very dominant there, right? Water element, naga, it's a place where there's a lot of naga energy. So a volcanic mountain, this fire element, it's dominant. So the types of spirits, for example, are going to be the Tsen, these kind of spirits that live in the world of fire. All this has to do with the non-physical beings that are recognized in the Tibetan Buddhist world. Many of them are protectors, many of them are different kinds of Dharma protectors. And their abodes are these elements in their subtle form. And so you could say that these mandala structures have the effect of balancing the elements, or strengthening the elements, purifying the elements. They help to repair the damage that we humans have made on the elements, because we are destroying the elements. As we destroy the physical aspect of water, or the physical aspect of earth; the subtle realms are also disrupted, and it becomes very disruptive to the spirits. And as the spirits become agitated and disruptive, then the blowback is on us humans.

The way that the ancient texts talk about this, like when Guru Rinpoche talks about these prophecies, and he talks about how in the future there's going to be more and more wars; what's behind that? What is the background cause of that? Well the cause of it is the constant non-virtue that we humans are doing, the constant destruction that we're doing. And as we destroy the environment, the spirits are disturbed, and then people's minds are disturbed, and people want to fight all the time.

There is this symbiotic relationship that mostly in the west we are clueless about. But our actions and the things that we are doing on the planet, mostly for our own personal gain, we're not taking any consideration that the things that we do — the earth that we dig and mine, and the garbage that we produce, and the fires that we make, and the smoke that we produce — are having effects on these subtle realms

that are also sentient. They also are becoming sick, and that's affecting us because we have this co-dependent arising, right? We have this law of interdependence, which is a law that the Mandala communicates. It communicates this co-emergent arising. Therefore, the prophecies say we will have more diseases. Every time we have war, a new disease pops up. And lo and behold, we have these really strange, pandemics that pop up seemingly out of nowhere. But there are backgrounds to this. So the human beings suffer more. We have more diseases. We have more calamities. We have more misfortune. Our economy goes down. Our yang energy or prosperity energy gets destroyed more and more. So there's this cycle that we're on, this very negative destructive cycle, and we are playing a big role in it. And so these structures help to pacify, to bring some realignment on these subtle realms to pacify the spirits. When the spirits are pacified, then we can feel more peace as well. When the spirits are happy, we experience more prosperity. So these kind of structures, and the rituals that are done around them — because there's also the practices that are done in accordance with these mandalas — have profound effects on all of these subtle realms, which has profound effects on all the beings living on those subtle realms, and that will bleed over into the human realm.

For example, just as a personal example of my own observation, in the little town that we live in, Lansing, Iowa, there's a thousand people that live here. It's a small river town that we moved in 2007, so we've been here for quite some time. And in this little town I notice the businesses are always struggling. Every year, somebody goes out of business and some new business starts there. What I've noticed, since we have built our stupa, and since we installed a Buddha, is that the prosperity of the town is increasing. It's becoming a vibrant little town. Of course, there's a lot of people in the town who are also trying to make this happen. But behind that, there has to be an energetic quality to draw these people, to inspire these people. There's more and more interesting people moving into our area and bringing all kinds of arts and all kinds of events that enrich the area.

This is what I've noticed. Since we Buddhists have been up on the bluffs quietly doing our thing, I like to think that we've played a part in bringing enrichment and prosperity to our little neck of the woods. Although, you know, I wouldn't go bragging about this to the local people. But I believe this to be true because I've seen similar things. Like why do some towns prosper and some towns don't? Why do some businesses — you just see one after another, they just can't make it work. Why? That has to do with the energy of the spot. That has to do with invisible dynamics that are there that generally in the west we're not cognizant of. So we are working on that level.

All these activities that we do — the structures of the mandala, the stupas, the practices — are working on this level, and that's where the beneficial effects come in. They're not necessarily overtly physical effects, although you can feel the effects and you can sometimes feel them very quickly. But it's something that sort of over time pervades and grows and you start to see these different changes in these different positive qualities.

So that's how it's understood. It's understood to work that way, and it works on these subtle elemental realms, which then show up eventually in the physical material realms that we can observe with our five senses.

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NURTURING THE CENTER: EVERYDAY PRACTICE

OLIVIA

I so value your ability to articulate the interplay of all of these levels. So the mandala — everything arises from the center is what you shared. And there's this exchange

between the center and the periphery as long as we nurture the center the periphery is supported. How does it look like to nurture the essence, on both an everyday practical level and then in our own path as practitioners?

KHANDRO KUNZANG

That is what we are practicing, whatever our practice is. From the context of a Vajrayana Buddhist path, it's a path that begins with some kind of preliminary practice. And then we receive empowerment to start engaging in a sadhana practice according to the lineage. And so that becomes our method to introduce our own Buddha nature, to experience that. And once we start having a taste of that and we get confidence in that, that's the point, the point of the practices and the blessings that we receive from the lineages. So they have to have this lineage base.

We have a teacher guiding us. We're employing these spiritual technologies and hopefully going into retreats because it really does require that you have made time in your life. You've prioritized your time that you're dedicating to these methods, and the blessings of the lineage and the teacher co-mingle with your own innate buddha awareness. That starts to arise, and it comes in glimpses, and then you become more and more familiar with it and more confident so that then you go out into the world and you can stay in this sense without being distracted.

That becomes the practice. How to maintain this is your practice, you know, and that has to do with your vows. There's always vows and samayas that become essential. Actually, that's the main practice; practicing your vows to keep coming back to this. Because we don't want to go back to the bone yard of our charnel grounds, right? But it's going to be in and out and in and out and in and out. So how do we come back to the center? We come back to the center by re-engaging with the practices we were given and by the vows that we've taken. So we have to constantly strengthen those vows. We have to constantly find ways to inspire ourselves, whether it's

reading, study, sitting at the feet of the masters, going on pilgrimage — to go to the actual places where Buddha attained enlightenment — that brings these stories to life. There's all these ways to keep us in the path so that we can continue to develop this, and ultimately have confidence in it so that it becomes stabilized. In the face of all the stuff in the world, we become more and more able to maintain that center. So all the methods that we're given are the ways that we do this. And it has to be important enough for us to want to do this and to create a lifestyle that allows us to do that.

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EMPOWERING THE MANDALA & GYEPA RINPOCHE

OLIVIA

And so in terms of this Vajrakilaya mandala, what's the method then for these particular mandalas, for empowering the mandalas? Will the community then be doing regular practice daily or annual?

KHANDRO KUNZANG

Next year (2025) we're building the temple. So we are right now talking to architects, and by the way, we've hired a Vastu architect who does Vastu design, from the Maharishi community in Iowa. And that is itself a mandala from the Vedic idea. They build their buildings according to the mandala principles. So we thought this sounds right for us. So we're working with a vastu architect and coming up with the final design ideas. And then we'll start building. We now have a sponsor. For many years we've been on this fundraising journey. Now we have a grant and a sponsor, and will start building.

So after the construction, then the mandala has to be installed and that is done in the ritual. We have to invite a good Lama, and I've already been speaking with Gyepa

Rinpoche. I met with him in Germany this past September. He's the one I have in mind that I would really like to come with some of his Lamas. Then, like a sand mandala, there is a ritual way of constructing it.

These three-dimensional mandalas also have to be assembled according to the sadhana. So the Lamas will be engaged in the sadhana practice as they place each of the p'hurbas, and as they construct the mandala. So it's built and created in the context of sadhana practice. That will probably take at least a week, a week of ongoing rituals. Then that gets consecrated and stabilized, according to, in our case, the Namchak Putri Vajrakilaya cycle of Dudjom Lingpa.

After that, then yes, it becomes one of our main practices. Vajrakilaya is one of my main practices. So yes, it will be a place where people can come and engage in Vajrakilaya drupchens, periodic drupchens or drupchos, as intensive practices as a Sangha. It helps us to develop our practice, and also we can re-consecrate it. It keeps bringing the energy in to the sacred space with this mandala and continues to empower it. So it becomes again, this symbiotic, co-emergent relationship. We are benefiting from it, it's benefiting our practice, and at the same time, we're infusing this with this blessing energy of the lineage.

OLIVIA

And why this particular Rinpoche would be perfect for this?

KHANDRO KUNZANG

He had a very good connection with Lama Dawa. He actually presided over Lama Dawa's cremation. He's the lineage head of the Namkha Khyung Dzong school of Dudjom Lingpa. Their specialty is actually T'hroma, the Töluk school of Troma; but also Vajrakilaya. They are really experts in Dudjom Lingpa's works. I invited him to come out in 2020 when I was in Nepal and I participated in their drupchen, their

T'hroma drupchen in his monastery, and at that time invited him to come to our center, which he agreed to do. He was going to come in September of 2020, but of course it was all canceled because of COVID. So I had already made this connection. He and his brothers who are all lineage holders of this Namkha Khyung Dzong School have a very good connection with Lama Dawa. So it's somebody that Lama Dawa would have trusted.

With Gyepa Rinpoche in Germany

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PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF VAJRAKILAYA PRACTICE

OLIVIA

I'm actually curious because so you've done a Vajrakilaya tsalung and you said that one of your main practices is Vajrakilaya. So for you personally, when you think of prior to being such a devoted Vajrakilaya practitioner to after, what have you noticed for yourself? Of making this connection?

It was a practice I had to work up to. You know first I did dakini practice, peaceful Yeshe Tsogyal practice. Then after that, I did the guru practice of yab-yum, and then I did this wrathful yidam practice. That was my guru's instruction to me. Like, nope, you've got a lot of purifying to do before you can handle this kind of energy, because it is very intense. Wrathful deities are basically an intensification. That's what we mean by 'wrathful.' Vajrakilaya is actually wrathful Vajrasattva; it is the essence of Vajrasattva, this beautiful, peaceful deity. But in their, 'take action right now!' mode. So then they're wrathful. So there are swift results.

There can be lots of upheavals and disruptions, you know. Like for example, when we were building this Vajrakilaya Mandala in Nepal, and in 2020, when it was in the final stages of being constructed, they put it together for us so I could take pictures. Suddenly this wild storm came out of nowhere, this wicked wind. It was amazing! Even Choten, the Bhutanese wood carver was amazed. And then again, when it was shipped to the US in crates and we had it in storage through the COVID years, and then last year in 2023, we decided to take it out of storage and put it in our yurt teaching space. So we unpacked it and we brought it there. And then again this wild storm with lightning, rain, just out of nowhere, as we're unpacking this. Then an incredible double rainbow appeared. So, yes very strong effects.

I had to work my way up to being able to work with those energies because, wrathful practices are not beginner practices, actually. Which is why a lot of times they're kept secret. It's not really secret, but it's just that they can really be a strong, swift cutting through, because that's what it is; the imagery of the p'hurba, the ritual daggers, is to cut through. It's sort of the last resort, we're just going to cut this. And that can be hard to handle as we all know, if we have a sudden tearing away of

something in our lives, that can be a hard thing to handle, right? So, yeah, I had to work up to it.

But then you come to understand, what is the meaning of wrathfulness? What does that mean? It's really compassion. It's compassion in action. It's the kind of compassion that a mother has when she sees their toddler running into the traffic, and she's instantly in action, fast, ferocious, right? It's not angry. It's something fast, cutting through, as a kind of emergency.

So people have to be mature to handle this. Of course that means people have first done Ngondro. Then Lama Dawa had his students first start with Yeshe Tsogyal. So the Yeshe Tsogyal practice helps to develop wisdom awareness. Then the Guru practice to receive the blessings of the lineage. And finally, is Vajrakilaya, which is the practice we did last. But that's not the case of all teachers. Some teachers will start people with Vajrakilaya practice. So, it can be different according to the teacher and how they're guiding their students. But my experience was that I needed to kind of prepare to be able to handle that.

And it does, it brings swift results, swift clarity of mind, for the kind of clarity that brings this kind of pointed quality of mind to penetrate through stuff. That's the p'hurba quality. That's one of the four qualities of the p'hurba — the p'hurbas have four qualities. One is the wisdom awareness, the penetrative quality of cutting through the BS, the ability to do this, to be able to quickly discern what is what, that discernment process.

O L I V I A

And what are the other qualities of the p'hurba?

Ultimately they're symbols of compassion, because it's what's underneath all that anger. What's really underneath all of it is compassion, but it's being veiled. So it's a swift method for removing the veils to reveal one's ultimate compassion. So there's the p'hurba of bodhicitta, so that you develop the ability that through your great bodhichitta, itself can cut through. This is the ability to use compassion as a way of undercutting. So that's kind of the ultimate level.

And then there's the material phurba, the actual 'thing,' the ritual dagger that's used in a ritual way. That's the relative truth way of working with a p'hurba to conduct these rituals. So there's the material, physical, going into more and more subtle and more and more enlightened aspects that are, of course, non material. A p'hurba practitioner or Vajrakilaya practitioner has to understand these things.

And that's why it's really an advanced practice. I mean, I see people really fascinated with Vajrakilaya and they want to get their p'hurbas and they want to play with their daggers, and that's really not the right idea. So you have to have already had some experience of emptiness of self. To understand the true nature of these wrathful practices, and not get caught up in what can seem like kind of occult aspects, because it can really look like an occult practice. These rituals, these wrathful rites that we do, these little effigies we make and put in triangles and beat them and cut their heads off. You know, it can look like a shamanic exorcism. But if you don't already have experience of your wisdom awareness as yourself as the deity, you're going to misuse those practices. You're apt to misuse those as you don't have the maturity.

One of the things Lama Dawa used to say, if you try to do these wrathful practices — because people would want to learn how to do all the wrathful things, and I sometimes get requests from people to teach these the wrathful rites, and these are

people who haven't done ngondro, they haven't done the generation of the deity and they just want to do this magical stuff — and Lama Dawa used to say, if you do that, if you don't have the 'pride of the deity,' the confidence that "I am Vajrakilaya," with the understanding what that means, which is the emptiness of self; then if you try to do this stuff it's going to come back on you. That effect will come back on you in a very negative way.

Therefore, they consider it dangerous if you don't have the wisdom awareness, and understanding; that you're in that meditative state while you're engaging in these rituals. You have to be in this state. Yeah, it takes practice. It takes having done the generation stage retreats sufficiently, and then you can start engaging with these activities.

I would say it's an advanced practice. But for those who have the prerequisites, for those who are moving on the path; according to the prophecies of Guru Rinpoche, this is going to be the supreme method to undercut this.

KHANDRO KUNZANG

I heard a story once, during the 90s, when we were at this cold war with Russia, before the fall of the Russian Empire, during the 80s and 90s, that Dudjom Rinpoche had certain practitioners, yogis, do Vajrakilaya retreat for 10 years. When they came out of retreat, that is when the USSR collapsed. It was around 1989, the Berlin wall fell. It was interesting. They came out of retreat and then all this kind of stuff happened in the world, which is how these things would work. How this wrathful energy would show up was, it would just suck the energy out of some negative manifestation, and then it would just implode on itself.

That's really how it works. It's not that we come in with a bigger bomb. It's not like this. It just literally sucks the negativity, or undercuts it, and it just, whoosh, collapses in on itself. So that's how we understand these wrathful practices.

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ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

OLIVIA

And for you, with building these mandalas, I mean, this is a really monumental time. I mean, literally monumental. But also just the fact that it's been a long time coming. It's been decades in the making. When you're thinking of your path as a teacher, and the spaces you hold for retreat, even just what you shared about the cold war, do you have any aspirations or ideas that come to mind of ways you might want to hold Vajrakilaya retreats or do things, to continue to support these difficult times?

KHANDRO KUNZANG

I don't know. I don't make a plan. I have no plan about it. It has to kind of arise right there. There has to be the interest. I have to see that there's interest in it. I probably will start teaching more about Vajrakilaya. As we manifest this physical structure, it is the opportunity for me to educate people about the importance of it, of the importance of the mandala, and also to talk about Vajrakilaya itself. So I will be taking more opportunities to start communicating this in a general way.

For example, the prophecies that I mentioned, in Dudjom Lingpa's prophecies, Kilaya Kajang, I'm finishing a translation of that and I will be putting that out on Saraswati Publications site. That is all about the prophetic visions and this cycle, and why it's important with the kinds of calamities that Guru Rinpoche describes. We can see, "oh my gosh, we are in this time. Look at how they're describing the times that we live in," to inspire, to wake up people's own karma. People have to have the karmic predisposition for this. So however that can be woken up, and certainly I will be doing that.

Ultimately, my aspiration is to invite, teach other Lamas to come, like Gyepa Rinpoche. But it's not like a business plan that you plan, "I'm gonna do this, and then I'm gonna do this, and this is gonna happen." I can't think that way. My teachers didn't think that way. That is not the right way. You know, as a teacher, there has to be people making these requests of you. That's how this tradition works. That's how we have to understand it. We go to the teachers, we make a request, and based on the requests, they manifest. Like all of these texts, the texts I just mentioned, came because a student requested this of Dudjom Lingpa, and so therefore this comes out. And then we all benefit from this. Yeshe Tsogyal requests Guru Rinpoche to give ideas about the future. So then he speaks this and she writes it down and hides it as terma. There has to be the request. It can't be, "I'm a teacher with my ambition and I'm going to create my Dharma center." It can't be like this. It has to have this organic growth of the right people coming because of karmic connections, and then you seeing the need for this, or feeling prompted, that it feels like it's time for this. It has to be like this.

OLIVIA

Feels very mandala principle oriented.

KHANDRO KUNZANG

Very mandala principle, yes. And if it's meant to happen, it will happen, right? So I don't really make a plan about it. If it's meant to happen, it'll happen on its own like this. But there has to be the maturity of the students, too. For something like this, I have to see the maturity of the students.

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THE ORIGINS OF VAJRAKILAYA: GURU RINPOCHE IN YANGLESHO

OLIVIA

You mentioned the story with Guru Rinpoche and the original arising of Vajrakilaya teachings itself in Yanglesho, do you want to share about that story?

KHANDRO KUNZANG

I'll see what I can remember about it. He was in Yanglesho practicing, and there was all kinds of disruptions. He saw that he needed to have a way to deal with obstacles. So he sent some of his attendants, one of them was a Nepali man, to Bodh Gaya to get this particular cycle, which they received from a Dakini. You know, there's this kind of mysterious Dakini involved in this story of Vajrakilaya that we don't know a lot about. But anyhow, he received these texts and then he did the Vajrakilaya practice and actualized the Vajrakilaya practice and subjugated many of the disturbing spirits that were arising in that area.

And then, while he was engaged in that practice is when King Trisong Detsen sent an emissary to him to say, please come to Tibet because the King was trying to establish Buddhism as the national religion, and they were having so many problems. They were trying to build this monastery and the spirits were disturbing. Tibet was mostly a Bon shamanic culture, and there was a lot of resistance to bringing this new Buddhism. So the king was advised to invite this tantric master, Padmasambhava. So where was he? He's in Nepal, in this cave. So he was doing Vajrakilaya practice and actualizing those activities as this request came. So yes, it sort of marks the beginning of our story with Guru Rinpoche's connection with Tibet. Those were the interdependent connections that came together for him to go to Tibet and then help to establish the Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet. And so the Vajrakilaya played a really important role in that.

And then Yeshe Tsogyal, when she had to go find her consort, she had to go find Atsara Sale in Nepal. Nepal was just this kingdom of Bhaktapur at that time. And she had to make this arduous trek across the mountains to go find this guy. Of course, there's no email or phone number or address. She just knows he's got a red mole on his chest and some kind of marks and signs on his body, like this. And then she shows up at the market, the square where, you know, that's where you go when you go to these towns, you go to the market square and then you're noticed.

And he walks right up to her and says, "Hey, you're looking for me?" But he was an indentured servant, he was an Indian, a foreigner in Nepal, as a servant. And she had to buy him from the woman who owned him. And she needed a lot of money to do that, which she didn't have. She had used up all her gold that she had brought on this journey. Then this opportunity arose where some noble person's son had suddenly died. And she resurrected him using Vajrakilaya practice. She used the Vajrakilaya practice to resurrect him from the dead. As gratitude, the parents of this boy asks her what do you want? And she's like, well, I need this much gold. So that's how she got the gold to buy Atsara Sale, to bring him back to Tibet. That was through Vajrakilaya activity practice.

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nd then as the story goes, when Guru Rinpoche was teaching, Yeshe Tsogyal specifically requests Vajrakilaya practice from him. Why is she requesting this? Because of all the problems she has as a woman practicing. She makes this long lament of all the difficulties she's had to endure being a woman, trying to do this practice; how she's been maligned, all the gossip that follows her, all the obstacles. So she felt, "I need to do this. I need to have a way to remove all these obstacles that I'm encountering trying to practice as a woman." And she makes this specific request of Guru Rinpoche to teach her Vajrakilaya. He was actually telling her that she should do Amitabha practice. He felt that was the supreme practice. And she's like, no, I have so many obstacles. I want the Vajrakilaya practice. So that became the condition

for her to receive this practice from him in the first place, which I think is interesting. It started with a woman and it became Yeshe Tsogyal's practice to deal with the obstacles she was having doing practice as a woman. So it's kind of a woman's practice in a way. And so she then got accomplishment with Vajrakilaya. Then she needed a consort and brought Atsara Saleh, so it became central to her ability to be able to continue on her path with no obstacles.

So as practitioners, we use this Vajrakilaya practice as it supports our practice by removing obstacles that can come our way to doing practice. And of course, Guru Rinpoche taught this to his major disciples in Tibet, and it's been hidden as termas, and it's become very pervasive through the Nyingma school and also in the Sakya school.

So Vajrakilaya is a major yidam, but it started as Guru Rinpoche receiving this text while he's in Yanglesho, then actualizing the practice to deal with the kinds of obstacles that were arising in that area. Some of them had to do with a king. There was a king in Godavari whose son had been turned into a frog by the local nagini and he had to go subjugate that nagini. That's in Godavari. There's a place that commemorates that, where he subjugated the nagini and got the prince back out from the naga realm. There was all kinds of things he did, using Vajrakilaya to deal with these kinds of manifestations of problems that they saw where spirit related. And then as Guru Rinpoche is going to Tibet, he encounters many, many obstacles of different mountain spirits, and lake spirits, you know, and uses Vajrakilaya to deal with that.

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WHAT MAKES THIS MANDALA UNIQUE & CLOSING

OLIVIA

Well, is there anything else you want to share about the Vajrakilaya Mandala, Vajrakilaya in general? Like anything that makes the mandala unique in terms of its purpose or just anything else you want to share?

KHANDRO KUNZANG

I don't know of any other three dimensional Vajrakilaya Mandala, other than in Bhutan, there is one. It will be the first of its kind in North America, both in America and Mexico. So that makes it unique. There's a few places that have created smaller three-dimensional mandalas; but not this large. This is thirteen feet high. So yeah, that makes it very unique.

OLIVIA

It's so beautiful. I mean, thank you so much for staying with this vision. It's definitely important. And I hope that it leads to more activities in this way, more wrathfully beneficial activities.

KHANDRO KUNZANG

So do I. I'm feeling, of course, with all the things going on in the world today, the timing of this couldn't be sooner. But I trust the timing. I mean, I didn't know when we would be able to finish this, because it's really hard to raise money. And then this year, this wonderful sponsor showed up, and they're a hundred percent behind this project. So it's just the ripening of auspicious causes and conditions, along with our practices that we're doing to generate, to create auspicious circumstances. And I just trust the timing. So our timeline is in 2025, the temple will be constructed. Then the interior work will continue in 2026. We're planning the consecration in summer of 2026.

That's our timeline. I feel it's important to have deadlines because there's something energetic about a deadline. I found this when we built the stupa. I had no idea how to build a stupa. But we made a deadline. We said we're going to consecrate it at this time. And there's something about that that mobilizes energy when you have this deadline. So, it's important to make a specific time. We're setting things in motion. And then there is the Mexico mandala. I'm very committed to helping them, too.

They still have to buy the property. They have to buy land. They have the mandala now. That's finished. Now they have to buy the property.

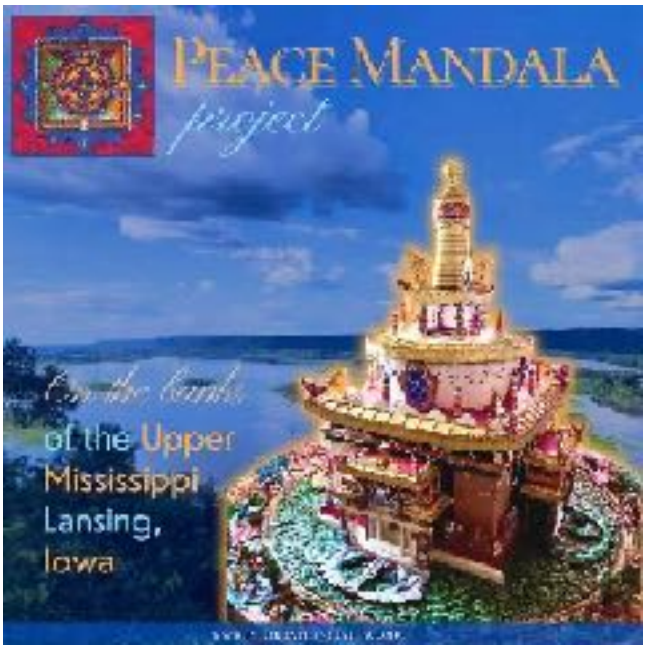
Then the Nepal mandala is taken care of itself. So I'm also committed to seeing these installed and consecrated as quickly as possible. That's my main focus. I may not be teaching as much this year because I will be very involved in this.

OLIVIA

Well, thank you so much, Khandro Kunzang. Always a pleasure to be in your presence.

KHANDRO KUNZANG

Thank you very much. And I hope we meet soon.



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