

# Exploring Personal Yidam Practices in Vajrayana Tradition: A Journey to Enlightenment

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## Abstract

*Personal Yidam<sup>1</sup> practices in the Vajrayana tradition serve as a meaningful pathway to uncover one's inherent Buddha nature and nurture enlightened qualities. These practices, deeply rooted in ancient teachings and lineage transmissions, provide a direct path for individuals to engage with the wisdom and compassion of meditational deities called Yidams. The study explores the essence of personal Yidam practices, exploring their purpose, methods, significance, and transformative potential. The primary aim of personal Yidam practices is to dissolve dualistic perceptions and awaken the practitioner's inherent potential for enlightenment. Through elaborate visualization techniques and concentrated meditation, practitioners immerse themselves in the divine qualities and enlightened attributes of their chosen Yidam deity. Guided by a spiritual teacher, practitioners select a Yidam that resonates with their temperament, aspirations, and spiritual path, embarking on a journey of inner transformation and realization. In conclusion, personal Yidam practices in the Vajrayana tradition represent a sacred journey of self-discovery, transformation, and enlightenment, rooted in devotion, wisdom, and compassion, these practices offer a direct path toward enlightenment, guiding practitioners to realize their fullest potential and embody the awakened mind of the Yidam.*

**Keywords**— *Yidam, Buddha nature, enlightened qualities, enlightenment, Practitioners*

<sup>1</sup> Chosen meditation deity in Tibetan buddhism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Vajrayana Buddhism is the religion that is also practiced in Bhutan, despite the other Buddhist vehicles of Theravada and Mahayana. In the Vajrayana tradition, the essential part of practices is the Yidam or the deity meditation. (Rinpoche T. B., 1991) The practitioner's deity can be any form of Yidam or deity that is comfortable or well-known to the individual practitioners. Yidam means "heart bond deity," which is to be the close relationship we should experience. The purpose of the Yidam practices in Vajrayāna Buddhism is to "Purify one's impure perception of all appearances and experiences." (Buswell, Robert E, Lopez, Donald S, 2013) Personal Yidam practices in Vajrayana Buddhism are profound and transformative spiritual practices that involve the visualization and meditation of specific meditational deities. Yidam, which translates to "mind deity" or "personal deity," represents an embodiment of enlightened qualities and serves as a focal

point for practitioners to cultivate wisdom, compassion, and spiritual realization. At the heart of personal Yidam practices lies the recognition of the inseparability of one's mind and the enlightened qualities symbolized by the Yidam. These practices are deeply rooted in the rich tapestry of Vajrayana teachings and are passed down through lineages from teacher to disciple. (David P Jackson, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, 2015)

Within the rich tapestry of the Vajrayana tradition lies a profound and transformative spiritual practice known as Personal Yidam Practice. This practice revolves around the cultivation of a deep and intimate relationship with a meditational deity, or Yidam, as a means to awaken one's inherent Buddha nature and attain enlightenment. With roots dating back to ancient Tibetan Buddhism, Personal Yidam Practice has been upheld as a sacred and effective method for spiritual growth and realization. (Rinpoche T. B., 1991)

This paper, explores the intricacies of Personal Yidam Practice within the Vajrayana tradition, aiming to shed light on its role, significance, and efficacy in understanding how practitioners engage with their chosen Yidam deity, the transformative processes involved, and the impact of this practice on their spiritual journey. Through this research, we aspire to contribute to a deeper understanding of Personal Yidam Practice in the Vajrayana tradition, offering valuable insights into its timeless wisdom and its potential to empower individuals on their path toward enlightenment and inner transformation.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Personal Yidam practices in the Vajrayana tradition are profound and transformative spiritual practices that involve the visualization and meditation of specific meditational deities. Yidam, which translates to "mind deity" or "personal deity," represents an embodiment of enlightened qualities and serves as a focal point for practitioners to cultivate wisdom, compassion, and spiritual realization. (Rinpoche T. B., 1991) At the heart of personal Yidam practices lies the recognition of the inseparability of one's mind and the enlightened qualities symbolized by the Yidam. These practices are deeply rooted in the rich tapestry of Vajrayana teachings and are passed down through lineages from teacher to disciple. (Rinpoche S., 1990)

The primary aim of personal Yidam practices is to awaken the practitioner's inherent Buddha nature and to cultivate qualities such as compassion, wisdom, and skillful means. By meditating upon the Yidam, practitioners seek to dissolve dualistic perceptions and realize the unity of all phenomena. (Rinpoche G. , 1996) The choice of a personal Yidam is often guided by a spiritual teacher who considers the practitioner's disposition, spiritual aspirations, and the specific practices within their lineage. Different Yidam deities represent various aspects of enlightenment and cater to the diverse needs of practitioners. Practitioners engage in elaborate visualization practices wherein they imagine themselves as the Yidam deity, surrounded by its enlightened environment. Through concentrated meditation and mantra recitation, practitioners cultivate familiarity with the Yidam's qualities and strive for union with its enlightened nature. (Studholme, 2002) Personal Yidam practices are typically transmitted within the context of Guru Yoga, emphasizing the pivotal role of the spiritual teacher in guiding the practitioner along the path. The transmission of Yidam practices often involves initiation ceremonies

and vows of commitment to maintain the purity and secrecy of the teachings. (Pelmo, 2002)

Through dedicated practice, practitioners aim to transform habitual patterns of ignorance, attachment, and aversion into wisdom, compassion, and skillful action. Personal Yidam practices facilitate the purification of the mind and the realization of one's innate potential for awakening. (Rinpoche T. B., 1991) While personal Yidam practices often involve formal meditation sessions, the ultimate goal is to integrate the insights and qualities cultivated during practice into all aspects of daily life. This integration allows practitioners to embody the enlightened qualities of the Yidam in their interactions with others and the world around them. (Rinpoche T. B., 1991)

Personal Yidam practices are profound spiritual methods that offer practitioners a direct path to realization and liberation within the Vajrayana tradition. Through the union of wisdom and compassion, practitioners embark on a transformative journey toward the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized document analysis methods to uncover insights into the personal yidam practices within the Vajrayana tradition. By systematically examining a variety of textual sources such as Tantras, Guru Yoga, Biographies of Vajra masters, and Lineage Texts from Kagyu, Nyingma, Sakya, and Gelug lineages, the study aimed to extract meaningful information related to this concept.

While document analysis was not the sole method employed, the research delved into a range of written materials to deepen the understanding of Personal Yidam Practice. Through content and thematic analysis of literature on the subject, the study sought to shed light on the significance of personal yidam practices in the Vajrayana tradition.

By exploring the transmission of teachings from one guru to the next through lineage texts, this research aimed to gain valuable insights into the practice of Personal Yidam within the Vajrayana tradition. The availability of diverse written sources enriched the study, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this spiritual practice.

## IV. DISCUSSION

Yidam practices are the central part of the Vajrayana tradition, and the Vajrayana practitioners need to know that the yidam deities are not external to one's mind but rather images that help us within the individual mind. The

Yidam practice's primary purpose is to attain the quality of a perfect Buddhahood mind in the forms of three aspects of the Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya, and Nirmānakāya. (Vajrayana Buddhism in the Modern World, 2018) In Yidam's practice, we visualize ourselves as an enlightened deity, which will help us overcome our sensual perception towards the perception of emptiness. To practice the Yidam deity, in Vajrayāna, the qualified master should introduce the Yidam deity to the practitioners focusing on what we need at the stage of practice, which is the teacher-guided method. (Simmer, 2002) It is an essential part of Vajrayāna Buddhism because, through these Yidam deity practices, one will attain siddhis, our obstacles will be removed, and we will obtain powers, receive blessings, and give rise to the realization. Yidam's practice encourages us to consider reality to be genuine. We envision ourselves as impeccable, Yidams. (Rinpochee G., 1996)

The Yidam practices make our path fast. The practice involves elaborate visualization, mantra recitation, and a meditation practice that a teacher teaches. Dharmakāya is the true essence of the Buddhahood that appears as the Sambhogakāya, which is inseparable from one another. The Dharmakāya has no form. It is the real fundamental nature of our mind, free from the inherent existence and free from the discursive thoughts, which is the body of complete enjoyment, which form the ultimate state of Buddhahood Sambhogakāya; the manifestations of the Sambhogakāya are referred to as the Yidam deities. (Rinpoche S., 1990)

In Vajrayāna Buddhism, the practitioner tries to turn their attention towards depicting one individual choice Yidams represent the ultimate state of the enlightenment. The variety of Yidam deities do have the same essence. They are the manifestation of enlightened beings. In any case, one should recognize how things are and how things show up. In reality, the manifestation of the Yidams is the expression of enlightenment, displaying the immense compassion of the Buddha free from the necessity of appearing in a specific form. Every Yidam is the reflection of our wants and needs. (Simmer, 2002) Thus in Vajrayāna Buddhism, if one practices the Yidam deity meditation and cultivates with one's mind intensively for an extended period, then one will have the actual realization of the true manifestation of the Sambhogakāya. (Rinpoche T. B., 1991)

In Vajrayāna tradition, the Yidam practice is subsumed under two-stage "Generation stage" and "Completion Stage." The generation stage is to purify the external primordial primarily through visualization of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and their mandalas. The first stage of the

meditation in Vajrayāna is the visualization of oneself as the Yidam deity, the generation stage (Tib: skyed rim). The completion stage is realizing the emptiness through our wind energies based on the channels and the essence of our subtle body. (Rinpoche V. S., 2007) The practice of the union of two-stage is the visualizing of Yidam as illusionary or dream-like. From the standpoint of the external phenomena, it is the generation stage, and the illusionary emptiness and dream-like represent the completion stage. All the Yidam practices should start from the generation stage; without knowing the essential preliminaries of the generation stage with the particular process with the absolute requirement, one cannot do the Yidam practice.

The preliminary practice of the generation stage can include taking refuge, Vajrasattva, and Guru Yoga as per the individual instructions (The text on the individual practitioners). In this generation stage, it is vital (that the best skills are) to know all phenomena in the mandala of the Buddha. Our attachments are eliminated with the practice of the generation stage. After the accomplished practice of the generation stage, the external phenomena are completely transformed and overturned; all impure phenomena will no longer exist, in fact, a process of transforming consciousness into wisdom. (Rinpochee B. T., 1991)

The straightforward technique and the method of the generation stage Yidam practice are: first, we need an image of the external object of the particular Yidam deity mainly to help in visualization. In the first steps, if the Yidam deity is Avalokiteśvara, in Tibetan art, It is depicted in white color, with one face, four-armed, in a seated position.

Look at the image of the Yidam deity to visualize. Without looking at the image, practice the visualization by memory. Now one can visualize oneself as the white Avalokiteśvara seated in the crossed leg position on the lotus of the moon disk, with the seed syllable (**Tib: HRI**) in the heart, with the two first hands folded at the heart, the lower right hand holding crystal prayer beads and the left a jeweled lotus. The two legs are in a vajra posture. The body is adorned with many beautiful silks and jewels. (Rinpoche V. S., 2007) Feel familiar with the Yidam deity Avalokiteśvara and continue the practice with closed eyes if you can visualize, otherwise open your eyes, look again at the image in front, and continue step by step.

After fully visualizing oneself as the Yidam Avalokiteśvara, then above the head arises different colors of rays, eight auspicious signs, beautiful ornaments, songs, and all types of auspicious elements as an offering symbol to all Buddhas and bodhisattvas to the ten different

directions. With the blessings of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas from the ten directions, the rays of light flow back to the practitioner and all sentient beings worldwide, leading to clean all negative energies and thoughts becoming as pure as yidam Avalokiteśvara. Then visualize oneself as real as Yidam Avalokiteśvara and recite the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara. "Om mani pad me hūm," keeping the seed syllable word "HRI" in the center surrounded in the right direction by the six-syllable mantra. (Rinpoche G. , 1996)

During the recitation of the mantra visualize that the rays of light flow to all sentient beings in samsāra from oneself as a Yidam. The negative energies of sentient beings are cleaned. No sentient being is left behind in samsāra; with the merit of reciting the mantra, all the sentient beings are placed in the field of Buddha and everything is dissolved into the stage of emptiness. During the completion stage (**Tib: Dzogchen**), the Yidam meditator visualizes the dissolution of his/her Yidam deity into emptiness and remains in non-conceptual awareness. Overall, personal Yidam practices are profound methods for realizing one's innate Buddha nature, transforming the mind, and ultimately attaining enlightenment within the Vajrayāna tradition. (Rinpoche V. S., 2007)

## V. CONCLUSION

Exploring individual Yidam practices within the Vajrayana tradition unveils a deeply personalized and transformative path toward enlightenment. At the core of this tradition, the Yidam symbolizes a meditative deity embodying the practitioner's enlightened qualities. Through visualization, mantra recitation, and ritual practices, individuals establish a profound connection with the Yidam, surpassing mere intellectual comprehension.

This journey is distinguished by its unique combination of psychological awareness and spiritual commitment. Yidam practices enable practitioners to address and overcome internal obstacles, fostering increased self-awareness and spiritual development. The intimate bond with the Yidam acts as a reflection and a guiding light, showcasing the practitioner's inherent potential for enlightenment and offering a route to actualize it. Furthermore, Yidam practices underscore the significance of lineage and guidance from seasoned mentors. This ensures the transmission of genuine teachings and the practitioner's alignment with the wider Vajrayana community. The communal dimension of these practices underscores the interconnectedness of personal and collective spiritual advancement.

In summary, personal Yidam practices in the Vajrayana tradition present a diverse and comprehensive approach to

enlightenment. They merge individual dedication with communal encouragement, psychological metamorphosis with spiritual ambition, and personal reverence with the universal objective of awakening. Through committed practice, individuals embark on a profound journey that ultimately culminates in the realization of their utmost potential.

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