

Karla Jackson-Brewer

*Turning Turmoil into Clarity*

Week One: The Sacred Feminine and the Mandala Principle

July 7, 2019



Welcome everyone. My name is Karla Jackson-Brewer, and I'm going to be giving a dharma talk for *Tricycle* magazine called *Turning Turmoil into Clarity*. In this series, we will learn how to use the mandala of the five wisdom dakinis to transform the emotions that block us from wisdom.

A little bit about me: I've studied Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism for about 31 years. I'm an authorized teacher of the Tara Mandala Retreat Center in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, founded by my teacher, Lama Tsultrim Allione. I lead the New York City Tara Mandala satellite sangha.

Over the next four weeks, we are going to learn about Vajrayana Buddhism and Tantric Buddhism. You'll be introduced to the mandala principle and the feminine principle. I also plan to introduce the dakinis, the five wisdom families, the encumbered emotions that block us, and the wisdom expressions of those emotions. As an added extra, for each of the families we work with I'm going to share a brief meditation practice that helps us transform these emotions.

This series of talks is a very brief introduction to an aspect of Vajrayana Buddhism. The mandala practice provides us tools to support transforming turmoil into clarity. This talk is based on the work of Lama Tsultrim Allione, especially her book *Wisdom Rising: Journey Into the Mandala of the Empowered Feminine*. Today we're going to focus on the mandala principle, Vajrayana Buddhism and Tantra, and the sacred feminine in Buddhism.

Let's begin by taking a moment to generate our motivation. We want to generate an intention that what we learn this week and in the weeks to come will benefit ourselves and benefit all sentient beings. Take a moment and send that out from your heart. [Pause.] Thank you.

I want to begin by talking about Vajrayana Buddhism. Buddhism began in India in the 6th century BE. The first expression of Buddhism is often called Theravada ("Way of the Elders") or Sutrayana. This evolution focuses primarily on what the Buddha taught, the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and individual enlightenment or nirvana. This is sometimes referred to as a path of renunciation.

Karla Jackson-Brewer

*Turning Turmoil into Clarity*

Week One: The Sacred Feminine and the Mandala Principle

July 7, 2019



Around the 1st century AD, we see the evolution of the Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”) school. In the Mahayana view, the Mahayana vehicle encompasses Sutrayana, and it also boosts the expression of compassion. The Mahayana vehicle includes the compassionate ideal of the bodhisattva, wisdom beings that are available to help all of us in our own liberation on our path.

The other aspect that evolved with Mahayana is the concept of *bodhicitta*: the awakened mind. It is the practice of how we wish compassion for everyone and how we also share lovingkindness.

The third evolution is what we call Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle” or “Thunderbolt Vehicle”). Some people identify it primarily as Tibetan Buddhism, as it is the form of Buddhism is practiced in Tibet. Vajrayana emerged around the 7th century AD, and it’s here that the tantric vehicle starts to arise. Vajrayana encompasses Mahayana and Theravada, but also developed a yogic tradition. Vajrayana encourages or facilitates our own enlightenment in one lifetime. It’s pretty exciting!

Tantric Buddhism is key to Vajrayana Buddhism. In tantra, ordinary life is revealed as inspiration, wisdom, and liberation. Some people get confused by the word “tantra” because many of us first hear about tantra through talk about sex practices. But the word tantra means continuum or continuity. Tantric Buddhism arose around the 8th century and involved many more lay practitioners than previous schools had, as well as the eruption of the sacred feminine. We’re introduced to female deities like Tara, the dakinis, and this sacred feminine principle. Tantra is the continuity of awareness and luminosity that runs through everything.

In tantric practices we work with the sensory world. Our senses, symbols, color, sound, scent, taste, rituals, and mantras are all part of tantric practices. In tantra we’re also working with our emotions. We work directly with what are referred to as encumbered emotions in life: ignorance, anger, pride, craving or desire, and envy. The mandala practice of the five wisdom dakinis is a tantric Buddhist practice. We work with the dakini energy—the divine feminine or sacred feminine energy—in a process of embodying the enlightened expression of the divine feminine. This is like trying on an energy that has a higher vibration than the one you ordinarily work with, and feeling or experiencing what that’s like.

Karla Jackson-Brewer

*Turning Turmoil into Clarity*

Week One: The Sacred Feminine and the Mandala Principle

July 7, 2019



We have an opportunity to transform our encumbered emotions. We know that they create so much suffering, but we can transform them into their enlightened expressions: the expressions of spaciousness, mirror-like wisdom, equanimity, discernment, and all-accomplishing wisdom. Tantra teaches that we don't need to run away from our emotions, and we also don't need to be attached to them.

I want to talk a little bit about the sacred feminine principle. With the rise of tantra, as I said before, there was an eruption of the divine or sacred feminine in Tibetan Buddhism. The feminine principle at its core is often referred to as “the great mother.” She is universal in all cultures. In Buddhism she’s the universal ground of being, the primordial matrix, the womb of totality, all buddhas, everything, and even ourselves. We’re all generated through that energy. Pain and pleasure, life and death, male and female; they all come through the womb of the great mother, this great potentiality. That’s why when we talk about causes and conditions arising in Buddhism, we know that emotions will arise. It’s our work to not grasp onto them or get caught up by them.

The enlightened feminine is wisdom. In Tibetan it’s *sherab*, in Sanskrit the word is *prajna* or *pranya*. The dakinis are one manifestation of the divine feminine. Dakinis are often wrathful, though not always. They are the fierce, undomesticated, and in some ways uncontrollable energy of divine wisdom. They are very present in Vajrayana Buddhism. There are many stories about how dakinis show up as women to ancient teachers to test if they really understand the nature of their own mind, and whether they truly have awareness about the nature of reality. In many of those stories they don't, they fall short! But then they do learn, so that’s important for us to remember.

The Tibetan term for dakini is *khandro* or *khadro* which means “sky goer.” Dakinis are dynamic energies that are moving and helping us to transform. Dakinis teach through direct action and symbol. They sometimes come to our dreams as practitioners. They certainly can appear in rituals and retreats, and in many practices we visualize this dakini energy and we actually merge with it to experience the wisdom aspect.

Karla Jackson-Brewer

*Turning Turmoil into Clarity*

Week One: The Sacred Feminine and the Mandala Principle

July 7, 2019



Dakinis are fully awake. They are protectors on the path. Even though they come in the feminine form, they are ultimately beyond gender. However, they appear as feminine absolute wisdom. They choose to manifest in that expression as the mandala principle.

Mandala in Sanskrit means primarily circle, group, or association. It can also mean the “place that holds.” A mandala is essentially a center with four quadrants around it, often enclosed in a circle. When we do a mandala practice, we visualize the mandala with the deity as the center, that’s considered the palace for the deity. Then there are four gates around, and often there is a blazing ring of wisdom fire.

There are also outer mandalas. Outer mandalas are sacred places, sacred groves, and sacred mountains. Inner mandala are all the elements of our psyche, both the natural and physical elements. They are the process of inner transformation. When we do a dakini practice or work with this energy, we're working with inner mandalas. We're working with the five families which I will talk about.

Then there is the secret mandala. The secret mandala relates to our own mind, the nature of our mind, or our buddhanature. You just experience the secret mandala. However, most of us have to train through the physical mandala and the inner mandala to actually have the capacity to do that.

The psychiatrist Carl Jung was from Europe, but he also did a lot of work with mandalas. One of the things that he found is that as his clients moved towards psychological health they began to draw mandalas in art therapy. He himself drew mandalas and saw them as a path to individuation, wholeness, stability, and health.

In this session, I've given you some information about Vajrayana Buddhism and tantra. We've learned about the rising of the sacred feminine in tantra and the mandala principle. This is where we're going to do our work with emotions and transform turmoil into clarity in the coming weeks.